



PERPETUA



Athlete of God

BARBARA K. GOLD

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Preface

I have been living with Perpetua now for several years, and it has often been a frustrating relationship. There are so many unanswerable questions and so few sources of information. When the editors of the series and at Oxford University Press first extended the invitation to write a book on Perpetua, it was proposed that I write her biography. I soon realized that a biography was impossible because we know so little about her life. We have one short chapter in which the editor of her narrative tells us a few things about her (Vibia Perpetua was “well-born, educated in the manner of a free person, and married in a respectable fashion”). And we have the part of the narrative that is by Perpetua—if it really is by Perpetua—in which we hear of her visions and about her father and small child. Apart from her own narrative, everything about her is written by others, mostly men, who have sought to remodel her into the Perpetua they wished her to be.

Thus writing this volume has been a lengthy and difficult journey, one in which I have received much help from others in a variety of ways. When I was first starting to think about Perpetua, I went to Tunisia and was privileged to be a visitor to a group there for a seminar on Perpetua led by Thomas Heffernan. It was illuminating and inspiring not only to see the places where she might have lived and died but also to benefit from the company of people there like Tom Heffernan, Kate Cooper, Candida Moss, Stephanie Cobb, and many others. I have since taught Perpetua in seminars, given many talks on her at various conferences and universities, and had the benefit of learning from the many people I have encountered at my own institution and at other colleges and universities. My colleague, Nancy Rabinowitz, has been listening to me talk about Perpetua and responding with helpful thoughts for far

too long. Judith Perkins, through her writings and in conversation, has helped me think through whether Perpetua really existed or wrote this narrative at all. James Rives has been an enormous help with his many fine suggestions and his patience answering my emails. Brent Shaw, both in his writings and his visit to my senior seminar, has added greatly to my understanding of Perpetua.

I give special thanks to the editors of this series, Ronnie Ancona and Sarah Pomeroy, for extending the invitation to write this book; also my thanks go to the editor at Oxford University Press, Stefan Vranka, who prodded me when I needed it and waited patiently for me to finish.

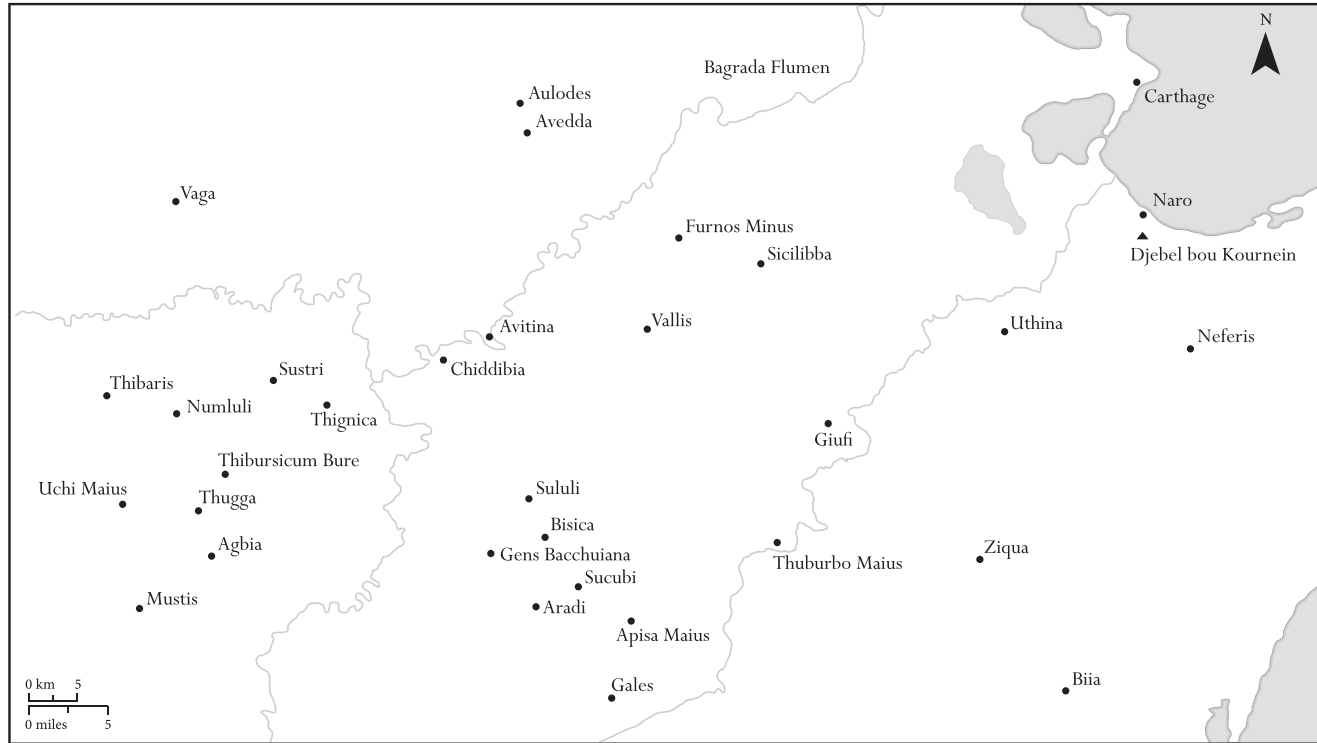
Finally I want to dedicate my book to some of the strong women in my life of whom Perpetua would be proud: Annabel Calvo Gold, Dana Calvo, and Mary Agnes Perpetua Eileen Doyle Zénon. And to the men in my family, who have always supported and encouraged brave and strong women: my husband Carl, and my son and Annie's father, Scott Gold. They would never have tried to remake Perpetua.

Barbara K. Gold

October 2017



Map: Roman Africa (after J. B. Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage from Augustus to Constantine* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1995], map 3), redrawn by OUP.



Map: The Territory of Roman Carthage (after J. B. Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage from Augustus to Constantine* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1995], map 4), redrawn by OUP.



Amphitheater in Carthage. Tunisia—Carthage (Carthage), archaeological site (a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, 1979). Roman Amphitheatre. Universal Images Group North America LLC / DeAgostini / Alamy Stock Photo. See Chapters 4 and 7.

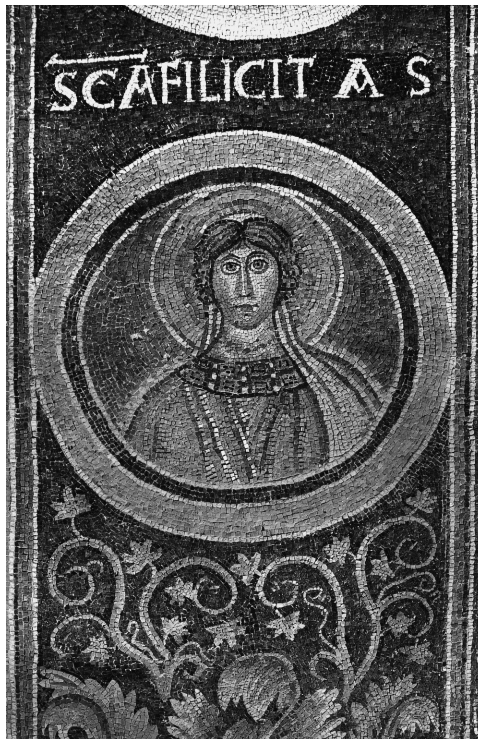


Saint Perpetua and Saint Felicitas, early Christian mosaic, from the Oratory of St. Andrea, Archiepiscopal Chapel, Ravenna. ART 187745. Photo Credit: Amphitheater in Carthage. Tunisia—Carthage (Carthage), archaeological site (a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, 1979). Roman Amphitheatre. Universal Images Group North America LLC / DeAgostini / Alamy Stock Photo.

PERPETUA



Perpetua, triumphal arch, Basilica of Eufraasius, Poreč, Croatia. Photo: Renco Kosinozic. Credit: Renco Kosinozic, Henry Maguire, and Anne Terry, Poreč Archive, 1990s–2000s, Dumbarton Oaks. Trustees for Harvard University. Washington, DC.



Felicitas, triumphal arch, Basilica of Eufraasius, Poreč, Croatia. Photo: Renco Kosinozic. Credit: Renco Kosinozic, Henry Maguire, and Anne Terry, Poreč Archive, 1990s–2000s, Dumbarton Oaks. Trustees for Harvard University. Washington, DC.

PERPETUA

Introduction

This book is titled *Perpetua: Athlete of God*. It cannot be called a biography because we simply do not have enough factual information to write the story of her life and family. But we can hope to recreate the milieu in which a young Christian like Perpetua grew up, was educated, married, became a mother, converted to Christianity, and resolved to martyr herself in her twenties along with her newfound family of other Christians. We have a great deal of information on the many aspects of ancient Carthage of the high empire that must have influenced Perpetua's life and death: the history, the ethnography, the literature, the religious life, the art and architecture, the politics, the social milieu. Perpetua was the product of a dizzying set of historical and social events that somehow produced a young woman who was clever enough to leave us with a piece of the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, independent enough to abandon her own family for a Christian group, and brave enough to offer up her life to her newfound God. It is extraordinary enough that she existed, but even more extraordinary that we have the narrative of her passion.

What I have just written makes several assumptions: that Perpetua did exist and did write a part of the *Passio*; that the text of the *Passio* can be read as a historical or social record; that Christian martyrs were persecuted in the high empire by the Roman authorities; that a text like the *Passio* can be regarded as literature and as rhetorically sophisticated; and that gender was an important consideration in the formation and consumption of Perpetua. Vigorous arguments have been laid out for both sides of each statement with little hope of coming to any clear conclusion.¹

Perpetua has become a veritable industry in the past twenty years. Brent Shaw, in his look back at the beginnings of Christianity in Africa and the “featured actors” in this “holy drama,” refers to Perpetua as the “new ‘it’ martyr” (along with her fellow female martyr, Felicitas, a “bit actor in the greater drama of a noble family”).² She commanded attention then, in the early third century CE, as she does now. Even if everything about her person, her text, her short life, and her death is open to debate, she demands our consideration. From the beginning, many readers were believers: They wanted Perpetua to be the author of parts of the *Passio* (sections 3–10) and wanted to believe in the authenticity of this text. And female scholars of antiquity especially wanted to believe that we had a woman in this period who left us a text in her own voice. If indeed Perpetua did write a part of the *Passio*, she would be our earliest Christian female to have written in her own name and the only woman writer to give us a first-person account of her Christian experience. Some authors hear her voice coming through the *Passio* clearly and distinctly. One critic says of Perpetua’s singular achievement, “There is something so unusual, so direct and uncompromising about her reportage that it has evoked a wholly unusual order of responses from a very wide range of modern readers. They know that there is something, perhaps ineffable, that marks her words as different in kind from any comparable piece of literature from antiquity. Realities are reflected directly in the rhetoric.”³ But another scholar of Perpetua reads the *Passio* as embodying two female martyrs whose depictions are “so rhetorically pertinent to the discourse of the period in Carthage as evidenced by Tertullian as to make suspect the women’s authenticity as real persons. Their representations seem to coincide too closely with the theological polemics of the period not to have been crafted to fit a specific historical argument.”⁴

Indeed, at the very beginning of my project on Perpetua, I had a conversation with this scholar that caused me to consider for the first time the real possibility that Perpetua was a construct rather than an actual woman martyr’s voice from the third century. How could I reconcile Perkins’ conclusions with those of a critic like Peter Dronke, who simply accepts what the editor of the *Passio* tells us: “from this point on, she herself (Perpetua) has recounted the complete account of her martyrdom written in her own hand and reflecting her own thoughts and ideas” (*Passio* 2.3). “Because of this,” Dronke claims, “we can still today hear Perpetua’s voice, and envisage precisely her experience.”⁵ Do

we accept Perpetua as a historical figure whose voice still connects to us from a great distance, or is she a part of a literary fiction that embroiders on what is perhaps a historical kernel and creates a largely ahistorical account that entwines contemporary debates with a highly rhetorical structure? We are caught on the horns of a dilemma. If we claim to hear from Perpetua the evocative power of a young woman who voluntarily went to her death, a willing victim, we might stand accused of a naive and unsophisticated reading of the *Passio*.⁶ But, if we fail to claim Perpetua as one of our earliest female voices from the past and cast her, along with other women from antiquity, into the mold of a fictionalized tool of male authors and editors, we gain an interesting text but lose a small, precious slice of historical reality.

Can we reconcile these two well-established and firmly argued positions without having to choose between them? Shifting the argument over the particularity of Perpetua's status and existence to a larger set of issues can help us to reposition these questions. The big question of whether the martyr texts should be read as historical records or as fictional accounts is embedded not only in the individual martyr stories like Perpetua's but in the whole history of early Christianity. How do we know what to take as truth and what has been exaggerated (by the Christians or their opponents) to make a point? Readers and scholars have been inclined to believe the narrative found in early Christian authors and church fathers that indicates that there was rampant persecution of Christians in the pre-Constantinian period. Was this historically the case, or was the frequency and intensity of these persecutions exaggerated by Christian authors in order to proselytize, to make their case, and to create in themselves an Other in opposition to their pagan countrymen? Candida Moss, in her book *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*, argues for the latter position.⁷ There were, of course, periods of persecution of Christians and others by the Romans, but the Christians' own stories of victimization and pain and the embroidery of their stories by later hagiographers tell a fictionalized story. As Moss claims, "Despite the dubious historicity of these stories, we know that they were preserved for entertainment, for moral instruction, and to encourage people If we want to use these stories, we need to be aware of their limitations."⁸ Moss separates the qualities and virtues that characterize the martyrs from believing in the "false history of persecution and polemic that has grown up around them."⁹

The separation of the acts of martyrdom themselves from the accounts and reception of them forms an important part of an ongoing debate among scholars about these elusive martyrs and their tales. The issue is most often framed as one of authenticity or of a fictionalization of an historical event. Some scholars have bridged the divide by treating the text from a literary perspective, without denying some historicity for the events.¹⁰ To confuse matters further, martyr texts do not easily fit into any one genre or have a specific place in the canon, so we are left without our usual literary norms to guide our assumptions.¹¹

I believe that the best approach to the *Passio* is to believe that it holds within it a kernel of historical truth and that the clear significance of the work derives in large part from its recording of one of the earliest of a long string of martyrdoms, an event that galvanized its audiences then and afterward.¹² But such texts are not historical documents as such: They do not claim to be reproducing in detail a historical event nor is the historical detail a central or major part of the story. The *Passio* offers no attempt to interpret or corroborate the events it describes. The characters in the *Passio*—Perpetua, Saturus, Felicitas, Dinocrates—receive practically no mention outside of this text.¹³ They must then be seen as characters, as representations, and not necessarily as historical characters (although they may have been historical characters). And the work as a whole (as it must be read) is a work of literature, marked by a greater rhetorical sophistication than has been allowed until recently. Erin Ronsse, in her assessment of the *Passio*, reminds us that our “choice need not necessarily be between absolute historical truth and fanciful fiction,” and she says that she does not mean to deny the authenticity of the *Passio* but rather to “open up additional interpretive possibilities.”¹⁴ The *Passio* is, she says, “meaningful beyond the ‘data’ about the past that it may provide.”¹⁵ We must regard the historical data as important, but the *Passio* offers us a richer narrative by combining what may have been an historical event with an extended story about this event. However much we believe in the historicity of the events narrated in the *Passio*, Perpetua’s is a voice that has been dominant in both early Christian treatises and in more recent studies of martyrologies. Her voice shines through the *Passio* and makes us want to believe that this story was true.

My approach in this volume has been to try to illuminate the life and death of Perpetua by examining the social, political, literary, religious, and physical conditions under which a young Christian woman in the late second–early third centuries CE would have lived. I have not

written a traditional biography because we do not know enough about her life. But we have a wealth of information on the Roman empire under Emperor Septimius Severus, on Roman Carthage in the high empire, on Roman Africa's writers and religions, on the treatment of Christians and the punishments they were given, and on other related genres of writing being produced in that period. I seek to understand how much we can learn about all these aspects of the early third century CE from the *Passio* and, equally, how other sources about the literature, religion, and culture of Rome and Roman Africa can help illuminate the *Passio*. We need to understand whether Perpetua was a product of her environment and its influences or a resister, who rejected and subverted most elements of her culture and created something new. Above all, we need to place the *Passio* in its correct historical place: It is certainly not medieval nor is it even late antique. It falls squarely in the high Roman empire and has to be measured against the culture of that period.

I have tried in this book to cover every important aspect of Perpetua's cultural milieu. Chapter 1 discusses the text of the *Passio*: its Greek and Latin manuscripts, the questions of authenticity and authorship of the various sections, the possible identity of the editor of the *Passio*, the shorter *Acta* that tell Perpetua's story in a slightly different version, and Perpetua's dreams or visions. This chapter lays the foundation for further investigation of Perpetua by looking closely at our only encapsulation of her: the text.

Chapter 2 focuses on the important element of gender in Perpetua's life and in her text, particularly in her famous fourth vision in which she enters the arena, fights with an Egyptian, and becomes male. An examination of the images in this vision in their theological, philosophical, theoretical, and social contexts gives us much valuable information about Perpetua's role as woman and Christian "athlete."

In Chapter 3 I take up other significant genres of writing that appeared at about the same time as the *Passio* and undoubtedly either influenced the *Passio* and other martyr acts or were influenced by them: the Gospels, the apocryphal acts of the Apostles, the ancient secular novel, the Christian novel. None of these works fits easily into a generic category, and they bridge an uneasy divide of fiction and history. By examining roughly contemporary works that are fluid and cross boundaries, we are better able to assess various aspects of a work like the *Passio* and to understand that it arose out of a common set of circumstances with other writings from this period.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the city of ancient Carthage: its history, culture, society, and religion. In Chapter 4, I look at the history of Carthage and at the non-Christian (or pagan) aspects of this great city. It is clear that the Christians owed much to their non-Christian countrymen and that there was no clear break or dividing line between pagan and Christian, so in order to understand Christian life, we must look to those who lived in Carthage before the arrival of Christianity. The Roman emperor during most of Perpetua's life, Septimius Severus, himself a native of Africa, is another important part of the history and political life of Carthage during this period.

Chapter 5 treats the many forms of Christianity and the way that Christian religion intersected with other aspects of life in Carthage. Here we look at the interrelationships of Christians, Jews, and pagans and the question of identity. How would a Christian be recognizable and was there any such thing as "Christianness"? And, if Christians were a complex and multiform group, where and how does Perpetua fit into this group? In this chapter, I go beyond the oppositions that have frequently been set up, stressing that the boundaries between groups were almost completely unstable.

In Chapter 6, I focus on what we know about Perpetua's life and circumstances: her family, her education, her social status, and her group of fellow Christians. Although it is difficult to have any certainty about most of these matters, we can use both the text of the *Passio* and evidence from roughly contemporary sources to help us reach tentative conclusions. Puzzles about such matters as Perpetua's absent husband must remain unsolved and subject to debate. Figures from the *Passio*, in particular Felicitas and Perpetua's father, receive special attention.

The social and physical conditions of martyrdom are examined in Chapter 7. I discuss what the term "martyr" meant and what distinguished Christian martyrs from Jewish and pagan martyrs; then what comprised a chosen death. Here I also try to explain the suffering and pain that Christians so willingly took on and the act of voluntary martyrdom. Two other early groups of Christian martyrs just before the time of Perpetua, the martyrs of Lyons and the Scillitan martyrs, provide a good comparison with Perpetua's group; each of these groups contained both male and female martyrs. Finally I examine the kinds of punishments visited upon the martyrs and victims, take a closer look at the arena in Carthage where we believe Perpetua perished, and focus on the dynamic of power and spectacle displayed in the arena.

In the last chapter, the main focus is the legacy of Perpetua's story. Perpetua the character was rewritten and remade countless times by editors, church fathers, and scholars, starting with the original editor of the *Passio* and continuing right up to the present. A major figure in the recasting of Perpetua is Augustine, who lived and wrote around two centuries later and mentions her in several of his Sermons. Augustine attempts to contain the disturbing figure of this female martyr even as he celebrates Perpetua and her companion Felicitas on their feast day, March 7. Such subsequent revisions and distortions by Augustine, Quodvultdeus, Notker, Jacob de Voragine, and others make the job of recovering Perpetua that much harder.

The puzzling contradiction around Perpetua is that, although we know almost nothing about her, everyone who reads her has a strong opinion about most aspects of her life and character. So, for example, Bradley calls Perpetua the product of Christian fanaticism because she abandoned her baby and family for her newfound Christian beliefs.¹⁶ Perpetua had, he believes, a "tragic history."¹⁷ Other scholars argue about Perpetua's dreams, using either a feminist framework, informed by contemporary feminist and psychological theory, or embedding the dreams in Perpetua's own "material and mental world."¹⁸ It seems that nothing to do with Perpetua and the *Passio* is simple or self-explanatory. But despite, or even because of, the long processes of reinterpretation and multiple points of view, we can, I believe, hear Perpetua's still small voice shining through to us if we try to listen. This has been my goal throughout this volume.

Perpetua's Passio

Text, Authorship, Authenticity

The *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (*The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas*) is a unique text allegedly created, in part, by a Christian woman of the early third century CE. It is not a biography. It tells us something about the culture that produced Perpetua, the very early Christian period, Roman customs and games in the province of North Africa in the empire, conditions of martyrdom in the Roman empire, and Roman Carthage. It tells us almost nothing about Perpetua herself.

But we do have Perpetua's narrative or what some readers believe to be a narrative written by her. The focus of this chapter is the text of the *Passio*: its probable authorship and the possible identity of the author of the framing sections, its authenticity, its Latinity, its structure, the various manuscripts that have come down to us (in both Latin and Greek) of the *Passio*, and the shorter versions (the *Acta*). If Perpetua is the author of sections 3 through 10 of the twenty-one-section text, she would then take an important place as the first Christian woman to write in her own name before the fourth century CE and the only author of a first-person account of a Christian woman's experiences. She can tell, however, only a part of her tale; it remains for her narrator to report on her martyrdom and death.

*The Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis:
Synopsis and Structure*

The *Passio* contains twenty-one sections that fall into four separate divisions. Sections 1 and 2 serve as the narrator's introduction. In section 1, he delivers the important theological foundation of texts such as this, quoting biblical passages (acts, John), and he gives the purpose of such an account: It is a witness for non-believers and a benefit for believers. The aim of the narrator here is to counter the prevailing idea that older texts and events are more weighty and reliable than more recent ones and to urge his audience to give equal attention to more recent events such as the martyrdom of Perpetua:

If ancient examples of faith that bear witness to the grace of God and serve the edification of humankind have for this purpose been set forth in writing so that by them being read aloud, which, so to speak, makes them visibly present, God may be glorified and man strengthened, why should not even new examples also be set forth that are equally suitable for both purposes? For even in the same way will these examples at some time be ancient and useful for our descendants if in their own present time they are considered of less authority because of the prejudiced veneration of antiquity. (1.1–2)

The task of the narrator is to prove the importance of martyrdom for the church, and thus he provides an overarching theme for the whole of the *Passio*.¹ The narrator might also have had to make a case for reading martyrdom accounts as part of church liturgy; this might not have been common practice yet in the North African church.² The instructions given in section 1 will be repeated and underlined in the epilogue (section 21).

Section 2 introduces us to the characters in this narrative and gives us the names of five of the six martyrs and the only biographical information about Perpetua that we have. All those arrested are catechumens, recent converts who had not yet been officially baptized. The other martyrs' names are Revocatus and Felicitas (who is the only other woman in the group and is called the *conserva* [fellow-slave, fellow-servant, or fellow servant in Christ] of Revocatus), Saturninus, and Secundulus. Saturus, the author of sections 11–13, will be arrested later (4.5). Apart

from the word *conserva* used of Felicitas, only Perpetua is described in any detail. She is *honeste nata, liberaliter instituta, matronaliter nupta* (“well-born, educated in the manner of a free person, and married in a respectable fashion”, 2.1). Perpetua had both parents living as well as a maternal aunt, and two brothers, one of whom was a Christian. She also had a nursing baby son. Another brother, the Dinocrates of sections 7 and 8 and the subject of two of her visions, had died at age seven. No husband is mentioned for Perpetua or Felicitas. We are given no information about the date or the place of the arrest or the reason for the arrest.³ Section 2 also tells us that Perpetua wrote the entire record by her own hand and reflecting her own feelings: “haec ordinem totum martyrii sui iam hinc ipsa narravit sicut conscriptum manu sua et suo sensu reliquit” (2.3).

Sections 3–10 form the centerpiece of the account. They are purportedly Perpetua’s words, told in the first person, and they mainly concern her imprisonment, her child, her four visions, and her four encounters with her distraught father. Her first vision (section 4) contains a barbed ladder with a dragon lying underneath it; Perpetua and her fellow Christian Saturus climb the ladder, with Saturus taking the lead. This ladder leads to a heavenly garden and a tall gray-haired shepherd, who gives them curdled milk. Present in this heavenly garden are thousands of white-clad people. When Perpetua awakes from her vision, she can still hear the voices and taste the sweetness of the heavenly food. The next two visions (sections 7 and 8) focus on her dead brother, Dinocrates. In the first of these (vision 2, section 7), Perpetua, who as a professed martyr now has the right to intercede, prays for her dead brother, who had died at age seven of a facial cancer or wasting disease. She sees that Dinocrates, who still has a facial wound, is hot and thirsty and is unable to reach the water in a basin nearby because of his small size. Perpetua awakes and prays for him. After Perpetua’s group is transferred to a military prison and put in chains, she has a second vision of her brother (section 8), who is now without his wound, drinking heartily, and playing like a child. She realizes that he has been liberated from his pains.

Finally, the famous fourth vision tells of Perpetua’s battles in the arena with an Egyptian (section 10). In this vision of her passion to come on the following day, Perpetua is led by the deacon Pomponius from the prison to the amphitheater where she is to die fighting the beasts. A huge crowd has gathered. But instead of a beast, in her dream

she confronts a large Egyptian (or the Devil) in hand-to-hand combat. In the midst of this fierce wrestling match, Perpetua suddenly becomes male (*facta sum masculus*, 10.7). Perpetua prevails, the crowd rejoices, a very tall man holding a staff and a green branch with golden apples gives her the branch and the kiss of peace, and she awakes. She realizes then that she will fight against the Devil and that she will ultimately be victorious (that is, that she will achieve martyrdom).

Interspersed among her four visions are four meetings with her father, who visits her several times in prison. He is clearly not a Christian, and he tries repeatedly but in vain to force Perpetua to recant and save both her own life and her family's reputation.

Sections 11.2–13 are written, we are told, by the hand of Saturus, a fellow Christian who is also imprisoned and who is perhaps the leader and teacher of Perpetua's group. Here Saturus has a vision in which he and Perpetua, after their deaths, ascend to a heavenly space, carried by four angels. Saturus and Perpetua also encounter an aged, white-haired man (as Perpetua did in section 4), and they are called upon to adjudicate an argument between a bishop and a presbyter.

Sections 14–21 are written by the unnamed narrator, and they complete the frame begun in sections 1 and 2. Here he recounts the pregnancy of Felicitas and the birth of her child, the treatment of the martyrs in prison, their procession to the arena and the reactions of the crowd of spectators, the trials against the beasts, and the deaths of the martyrs in the amphitheater, including that of Perpetua, who faces a fierce cow and ultimately dies by a gladiator's sword which she must guide to her own throat. We are given details about each martyr's death, but the main focus is on Perpetua—her demeanor, her struggles, her reactions, her encouragement of the other martyrs. This part ends with a paean to the brave martyrs, and, repeating section 1, reveals the significance of such martyrdoms for the edification of the church.

The final section of the work (21.11) takes us back to section 1, where the narrator has attested to the importance of martyr narratives, both ancient and contemporary, for the glorification of God and the edification of listeners and readers, to be both a witness and a benefit. The brave and blessed martyrs are lauded, and the importance of recent testimonies—as well as ancient—is again underscored. The Holy Spirit, God, and Christ continue to work for us all, as the acts of the martyrs attest. There ends the text of the *Passio* (see Appendix I for a complete translation).

The traditional date given for the martyrdom of Perpetua and her fellow martyrs in an amphitheater in Carthage is March 7, 203 CE. Although all parts of this date are contested, the month and day are very likely right, and the year is probably correct within a two-year span. The date of March 7, 203 is found in a late manuscript and at the end of the *Acta* (a shorter and later version of the *Passio*), and the day and the month are found in a later Roman calendar.⁴ The single Greek manuscript gives the date as the Nones of February, but this appears to be an erroneous date based on a different calendar. There is also internal evidence pointing to the year 203: the prosecutor Hilarianus had recently taken over the position of the proconsul of Africa, Minicius Opimianus, who had died earlier in 203. Another piece of internal evidence for a date in the early years of the third century is the notice in one manuscript (our most complete text of the *Passio*) that the martyrdom happened during games in Carthage held in honor of the birthday of Geta, one of the sons of Emperor Septimius Severus.⁵ The emperor died in 211. Caracalla soon afterwards killed his brother Geta and erased his name and image widely across the empire in 212; thus it is likely that Geta's name might have been deleted from copies of the *Passio* at that point.⁶

The earliest external reference to Perpetua and her fellow martyrs comes in Tertullian's *De anima* 55.4. In his argument that only martyrs can achieve entry into Paradise before Judgment Day, Tertullian refers not specifically to the writing of the *Passio* but to the courage of Perpetua (*fortissima martyr* [the bravest martyr]), who, he says, saw only martyrs in Paradise (*Passio* 13.8). Tertullian's work was likely written before 208, although Waszink puts it between 210 and 213.⁷ If this dating of Tertullian's work holds, we would have another *terminus ante quem* for the *Passio*.

Another issue that remains unanswerable is the authorship of the *Passio*. Whether Perpetua indeed wrote sections 3–10, as the text claims (2.3), we subsequently discuss (see the next section, "Authenticity"). But who is the narrator (sometimes called the editor or redactor)? Who wrote the framing sections (1–2, 14–21) and perhaps transcribed and reframed Perpetua's sections as well? Perpetua's contemporary and fellow North African, Tertullian, has been suggested as a possibility.⁸ Tertullian was one of the most prolific of the early church fathers. While the details of his life are often unverifiable, we can piece together a reasonable

account, and his many writings tell us much about him as a writer and a Christian.⁹ We know that Tertullian lived in Carthage during the reigns of Septimius Severus and Caracalla, and he was almost exactly contemporary with Perpetua. He was born sometime before 170 CE and his last work can be dated to about 213 CE, ten years after Perpetua was martyred. At some point in his life, Tertullian converted to Christianity and then is said by some to have adopted ideas associated with “Montanism” or the New Prophecy.¹⁰ It is not clear, especially in this period, where the boundaries were between orthodox Christianity and so-called Montanism.¹¹ Montanism, if it actually existed as a movement separate from mainstream Christianity, was said to favor, among other things, prophetic visions, female leadership, and direct communication with the Paraclete or Holy Spirit. Some have seen the *Passio* as a Montanist document, but at this period it is unlikely that such a movement existed, and it is more likely that the elements we see in the *Passio* (especially the first section) were typical of Christianity in North Africa in the early third century.

Before Tertullian converted to Christianity, he was a teacher of rhetoric. There are many parallels in both the thought and diction of Tertullian and Perpetua; in addition, there are many individual words that are used in similar ways, often with a particularly Christian meaning. So, for example, the word *refrigerare* (to have relief, to be refreshed or comforted). Perpetua uses this word four times (3.4, 3.7, 8.1, 9.1), and Tertullian uses it frequently in several of his works.¹²

While a strong case has been made by Robinson and van Beek, among others, for identifying Tertullian as the editor or redactor of the *Passio*, many recent scholars have just as strongly rejected his authorship.¹³ Given the close correspondence of some of the word usage and biblical allusions in the *Passio* and in the works of Tertullian, it is often suggested now that the editor may have been not Tertullian himself but someone in close proximity to him.¹⁴ Other names have also been suggested (for example Saturus, the alleged author of *Passio* 11.2–13), but the sad truth is that we cannot discover the identity of the redactor nor can we say with any certainty who wrote the different sections of the *Passio* or how much the editor might have changed the portions of the text written by other hands, allegedly Perpetua and Saturus. However, the close study of the prosody of the text done by Shewring and others makes one thing clear: The different portions of the text were not all written by the same hand.

The text, as it has come down to us, seems to be written by at least three different hands: I will posit an editor (1–2, 11.1, 14–21), Perpetua (3–10), and Saturus (11.2–13). We are told by the editor that Perpetua and Saturus wrote their sections themselves, in their own hands (2.3, 11.1). It is not, however, unknown or unusual in ancient writings for someone to write a text under the name of another person, so the editor's assertions that Perpetua and Saturus wrote the texts in their own hands may not be credible.¹⁵ The most reasonable current consensus is that Perpetua dictated her visions and thoughts to a visitor in prison, who then rewrote and modified the separate sections of the *Passio*, added a framing narrative, and wove together the parts into the integrated whole we have today.¹⁶ Countering the idea that Perpetua could have composed this in prison, Heffernan says, "If we are to believe the author's claim that these remarks were written in prison, it surely is pertinent to ask where Perpetua got the necessary materials, time, and space, both psychic and physical, to write these lines? . . . It is difficult to imagine how an individual could write such elaborately constructed sentences . . . under such impossible circumstances."¹⁷ Heffernan argues that our extant account came from a reconstruction of a verbal report, possibly given by Perpetua herself, and that any original record had to have undergone extensive editing. Other scholars disagree and think that Perpetua could indeed have left notes or the basis of a narrative when she was moved to a better part of the prison (or a different prison).¹⁸

There is strong prosodic evidence that one editor has not written (or even rewritten) the three parts of the text. Shewring has examined the prose rhythms or *clausulae* (rhythmic close of sentences in Latin prose) of the various sections and has determined that the writers of the first and second sections (the editor and Perpetua) end their sentences with two different sets of rhythms. In the case of Saturus (sections 11–13) there is no discernible rhythm (Shewring calls his prose *amétrique*). Shewring thus concludes that each of the three major sections of the Latin text seems to be by a different hand and that the whole text could not have been written by one person or even "rehandled" by one person.¹⁹ Fridh likewise examines and details the *clausulae* in the Latin texts of the editor, Perpetua, and Saturus, and he shows that the editor uses more *clausulae* than either Perpetua or Saturus. The editor favors especially the three types of *clausulae* that were used the most in metrical Latin

prose (especially prose of the later period).²⁰ Shewring also examines the Greek manuscript of the *Passio* (for which see subsequent discussion), concluding that this manuscript shows a uniform style and metrical rhythm and therefore likely was written entirely by one hand.

In addition to the prosodic and stylistic features we have examined, philological evidence also suggests that the different sections of the text were written by at least three different hands. Perpetua's Latin is strikingly different from that of the editor. Her Latin is linear, relatively simple, with few of the theological references and exhortations made by the editor in *Passio*, section 1. Her style is repetitive, with frequent punctuating words (such as *tunc* [then], 3.3, 3.4, 3.7, 3.8, 4.1, 6.6; *quasi* [as if, as it were], 4.7, 4.9, 5.5, 7.7), and it may reflect the *sermo cotidianus* (everyday speech) of African Latin.²¹ She tends both to repeat favorite words²² and also to use colloquial and familiar words such as *fabulari* ([to talk with in a familiar way], 4.2), often in a religious setting. Her mode of expression is highly personal and starkly reflective of her feelings, her body, and her physical circumstances. Her Latin has been called simple, even feminine,²³ but it may reflect an oral style. She is inclined toward parataxis and coordination rather than complicated embedded syntax, in a style that seems biblical or liturgical with its frequent close repetitions of words (for example, *doluit/dolui* [he grieved/ I grieved] in *Passio* 6.5).²⁴ It is not, however, simplistic; Perpetua's sections are full of rhetorical features, interesting diction, and stylistic flourishes.²⁵ She tends to avoid the many stylistic effects (assonance, alliteration) and high rhetoric employed by the editor.

Some readers of the *Passio* have trouble reconciling the alleged rhetorical artistry of Perpetua's writing with the raw emotional nature of her situation, and they resist ascribing to Perpetua the use of stylistic and rhetorical devices. So Dronke says, "Where writing wells up out of such fearsome events, it seems impertinent, or shallow at best, even to praise the writer's artistry."²⁶ How can we expect someone who is in prison awaiting martyrdom, this thinking goes, to be composing a rhetorically complex narrative at this highly emotional moment? Nonetheless, recent scholars such as Ronsse read the *Passio* as both having an interest in rhetorical contests and also as being itself a product of and a catalyst for the rhetorically sophisticated education of Christians.²⁷ She sees in the *Passio* a literary style and an "insistent sense of logical coherence through episodic presentations and across several narrative voices."²⁸ In addition, Ronsse points out that Perpetua plays with time in a way that

allows her to re-present images in her visions, images that will then have continuing value for her listeners and future audience.²⁹

How then are we to solve the problem of this text that has been passed down as the work of three different authors and yet presents itself as, to some extent, a unified document? Could Perpetua have written her own section while in prison and Saturus his own part, as the editor says? Would their cramped and dismal conditions in prison have allowed this? If we believe that the text could have been written in prison,³⁰ would it have been transmitted in its original form, or would it have been edited, lightly or heavily, by the person who finished the narrative? Two recent authors have argued that the sections said to have been written by Perpetua and Saturus were indeed by them and could have been written in their cells, but both, in the end, admit to light editing by a third person.³¹

Other scholars see the *Passio* as a rhetorical construction reflecting contemporary concerns, and they thus doubt or deny Perpetua's authorship. So Perkins says, "With its physical and redundant portrayal of . . . these two maternal martyrs, the *Passion* reflects issues central to the contemporary debates around Christ's real flesh and his real birth. This correlation raises suspicions that the representation of one or both of the women has been constructed in order to valorize the maternal body featured in these debates."³² While Perkins does not flatly deny that the *Passio* reflects a real situation, she remains doubtful and sees rhetoric at work.

The problem of the authenticity of this text is a perplexing one. Many or most of the Christian martyr acts are based on historical accounts which are, for the most part, lost to us or buried under later literary interpretations or rewritings of them.³³ Gary Bisbee points to both the historical basis for these acts and their later fictionalization and says that we are wrong to try to decide whether they are homogeneously true or false, authentic or inauthentic. Rather we should ask, "What is original in the transmitted text of our . . . acts and what is revised?" We should also realize that Christian writers reworked older material to meet the evolving needs of their audiences.³⁴ In our quest for the ur-text, the original, we may have been asking the wrong question.

Many scenarios are possible for the creation and evolution of our text. Perhaps there were three or more different authors; perhaps the editor and author of the framing narrative was an eyewitness and put the text together shortly after the event with few changes to the sections by

Perpetua and Saturus; or perhaps a later editor made changes to the text, reshaping the more subversive elements of Perpetua to his taste.³⁵ We will have to content ourselves finally with the formulation of Bremmer and Formisano, who concede: “In the end we cannot be wholly sure to what extent we have access to the *ipsissima verba* (the actual words themselves) of this remarkable young woman.”³⁶ And, as Bisbee says, “for the Christian community, what was important was not which *written accounts* were authentic but rather which *martyrs* were authentic. To the Christian community, the *acta* of an authentic martyr were *de facto* authentic. At least one function of the *acta*, then, was to demonstrate the authenticity of the martyr” (Bisbee’s italics).³⁷

The Manuscript Tradition of the Passio

The manuscript tradition of the *Passio* was thought to be made up entirely of Latin manuscripts, nine in all, until 1889, when a complete tenth-century manuscript in Greek (the only one to have come to light) was discovered. This manuscript was published in the following year by Harris and Gifford. Regarding the fraught question of whether the Latin or Greek manuscript was the original (which is taken up in the next section), Harris at first argued that the Greek manuscript was primary and the Latin manuscript a translation that was made later. Harris later changed his mind and determined the Latin to be primary, but the debate over this matter continues to the present day, with strong adherents on both sides.³⁸

Of the nine extant Latin manuscripts of the *Passio*, the one discovered at Monte Cassino (Codex Casinensis) is the most complete, although not the oldest (eleventh–twelfth centuries), and it contains several unique readings. It is in this manuscript that we find the allusion to Geta Caesar, which helps us to date the *Passio* to 203 CE. The earliest manuscript that we have dates only to the ninth century.³⁹ It is on the Codex Casinensis that most scholars and editors rely, although it does not give us a title, author’s name, locality, or date (these are variously found in the single Greek manuscript, in other Latin manuscripts, and in the *Acta*). This manuscript was the first one to be printed, in 1663. This *editio princeps* was based on the work of Lucas Holstenius (scholar, book collector, and Vatican librarian) and Pierre Poussin; Poussin published the text after the death of Holstenius. It was Holstenius who gave to the

work the title that we use today: *Passio Sanctarum (S.S.) Perpetuae et Felicitatis*.⁴⁰ In the following year (1664), the work was reprinted in revised form by Henri de Valois accompanied by shorter versions of the *Passio*, the *Acta*. His version carried the title given by Holstenius, and thus this title was passed along to modern editors and scholars, who have continued to use it.⁴¹

Ever since the discovery of the sole Greek manuscript in 1889 in the library of the Convent of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the relationship between this manuscript and the Latin manuscript has been hotly debated. The most urgent questions are these: Which was primary, the Latin or the Greek, and what exactly is the relationship between the Greek manuscript and the Latin manuscripts? The current prevailing view is that the Latin manuscript was earlier and the Greek manuscript was either a translation of a now-lost Latin version or a much-changed version of the Latin (it cannot be said to be a “translation” because of the many differences between the Latin and the Greek texts).⁴²

Some scholars have continued to hold to the view that the Greek version was primary, largely because this manuscript contains certain precise details (especially as regards athletic events in the arena) omitted in the Latin version.⁴³ While it is true that the Greek version does contain details not found in the Latin manuscripts, this can be explained by the fact that there were many things (for example, titles of Roman officials) that the Latin manuscripts would not have needed to explain to its audience, while the Greek manuscript might have expounded some details in a more precise form that the author thought unclear (or that were unclear to the author). Another point raised by those favoring the priority of the Greek is that there are sprinkled throughout the Latin several Greek words (e.g., *afa* [dust], 10.7). It would not, however, be surprising to find Greek words in the colloquial Latin spoken by someone like Perpetua in North Africa.⁴⁴

As Amat points out in her introduction and commentary, the Greek text is lacunary: It very often omits details that are important to or striking in the Latin text. So, Perpetua is said to be *anhelantes* ([out of breath], 10.4) when she arrives with Pomponius (in her vision) at the amphitheater. The much starker Greek leaves this detail out entirely, saying simply “and we arrived with difficulty at the amphitheater.” Or again, in section 20, where the editor describes Perpetua’s fight with the cow, when she is thrown, her robe is torn (*tunicam discissam*, 20.4), and her thigh exposed. Perpetua then tries to cover herself up. The Greek

text omits the detail found in *discissam*, thus making her gesture of covering herself puzzling.⁴⁵

Although the evidence is strongly in favor of the Latin manuscript being primary, the Greek manuscript nonetheless is a valuable witness to the passion of Perpetua and likely was written very early in the transmission of the text, probably before our earliest extant Latin manuscript.⁴⁶ The Greek manuscript wrongly gives Perpetua's martyrdom as happening during the reign of the emperors Valerian and Gallienus (253–260 CE); this is thus the earliest date that the manuscript could have been written.

The Acta

In addition to the several (nine) Latin manuscripts and one Greek manuscript of Perpetua's martyrdom, there were shorter versions of the *Passio* in Latin circulating as early as Augustine's time, now known as the *Acta*.⁴⁷ These are extant in many different manuscripts in two different forms (called A and B or I and II).⁴⁸ These shorter versions were probably used as part of the liturgy when the stories of the martyrs were read out to religious congregations.⁴⁹ They offer to us the same basic material as the longer manuscripts of the *Passio* do, but there are many differences both in factual matter and in the presentation. The *Acta* are distinct enough from the longer *Passio* that they cannot be said to be simply derived from (or an abbreviated form of) the *Passio*. Thus the relationship between the *Passio* and the *Acta* is murky and often misunderstood. To complicate matters further, the two different versions of the *Acta* (A and B or I and II) also differ from each other in their wording while treating the same material.⁵⁰ There are many more manuscripts of *Acta* A than B. Some of the A manuscripts are shorter and some longer than B, so one set cannot be said to be derived from or older than the other.

The *Acta*, like many martyr acts,⁵¹ give much fuller accounts of the judicial proceedings than the *Passio* does and employ the question-and-answer format (see *Passio* 6.3–4 for a much-abbreviated account of the court proceeding). We are given in the *Acta* some information that is not given in the *Passio* (and that may or may not be correct but this information seems unlikely). For example, Perpetua and her group were arrested in Thuburbo Minus, not in Carthage; Saturus and Saturninus are brothers; the women are interrogated separately from the men.⁵² In

some of the versions, Perpetua's infant son is not mentioned. In A, the husband of Felicitas is mentioned (although he is not present and has been cast aside); likewise Perpetua's husband appears in A and B. In both A and B Perpetua is attacked by lions, not by a wild cow, and Felicitas by a leopard. The two visions of Perpetua about her brother Dinocrates (*Passio* 7–8) are absent in the *Acta* as is the vision of Saturus (*Passio* 11–13).

Other important changes are the use of a univocal third-person narrative voice in the *Acta* instead of the three (or more) voices we hear in the *Passio*, and the removal of Perpetua as the central character of the narrative and the taming of her bold and revolutionary demeanor.

In more general terms, the *Acta* serve a different function from the *Passio*: In the *Acta*, we have mainly a set of confrontations with various authorities and relatives, followed by a brief and violent account of the martyrs' deaths. The *Passio* is a more literary account with embedded narratives and visions taking up a large part of the story, somewhat akin to contemporary ancient novels.

It seems clear that the later *Acta*, in erasing the strong and self-aware character of Perpetua from the narrative and substituting a more passive female martyr, were an attempt to bring this story more into accord with behavior that would have been acceptable to later readers and listeners in the church. So Kitzler says, "the consequence of such an adaptation of the original *passio* is that the feats of the characters—potentially subversive if adopted as guideline and imitated by followers—become ultimately a cause for admiration rather than imitation: *admiranda, non imitanda*."⁵³

In both the *Passio* and the *Acta*, the accounts are meant to edify the listeners by giving examples of martyrs who reject families and earthly ties and who endure pain and suffering in order to reach their heavenly goal. And both the *Passio* and the *Acta* have at their core nonliterary texts that evolve into literary forms with literary elements (more so with the *Passio* than with the *Acta*).

And I Became Male

Gender and the Athlete

Perpetua's Dream Visions

Perpetua's four visions are the core of her own narration in the *Passio* and the most discussed aspect of the work. They are vivid and self-revelatory; while they contain a number of standard images found in other late antique and medieval texts of women writers, they also give a clear sense of an individual and idiosyncratic personality that shines through the work.¹ They are alternatively referred to as "dreams" or "visions," with arguments supporting both terms. While I use the term vision, I suggest that we might call them "dream visions," since these visions came to Perpetua while she was asleep and they are marked by certain narrative techniques found in dreams.² At the end of each vision, Perpetua tells us clearly her state of consciousness by saying "and then I woke up" (*experrecta sum*, 4.10, 7.9, 8.4, 10.13).³ Perpetua uses terms for *seeing* in describing her visions: "Then my brother said to me 'My lady sister, you are held in such high regard now that you could request a vision (*visionem*) and you will be shown (*ostendatur*) whether you will suffer martyrdom or release' (4.1) . . . "And I asked for a vision and this vision was revealed to me" (*ostensum est mihi*, 4.2). Thus she stresses the very visual and imagistic aspects of these communications with God, using the verb *ostendo*, which shows a divine revelation.⁴

In addition to the words *visio* and *ostendo*, Perpetua repeatedly uses the verb *video* (4.3, 7.4, 8.1, 10.1). The use of the present tense here

is strikingly vivid and represents for her audiences her experiences. Nevertheless, as Ronsse well points out, translators nearly always take *video* as a past tense, “I saw,” erasing the vibrancy and immediacy of Perpetua’s *video*.⁵ Rendering these verbs as past tenses sets the events in a historical past—as completed—rather than as events that are continuing to pass before Perpetua’s eyes and are performative and interactive. The experience is less a first-person reporting of a past event than a way of bringing the community—the Christian community—into her story.⁶

The subject matter of Perpetua’s four visions can be interpreted in many different ways. Some critics have employed a psychoanalytic approach, using Freud or Jung as their hermeneutic tool. So the snake in the first vision would represent the phallic male.⁷ Others see Perpetua’s dreams as having parallels in her real world; so Robert, who is a strong proponent of this way of analyzing her dreams, sees as a backdrop for her fourth vision the Pythian Games.⁸ The most fruitful approach is to understand these visions as “redolent of the social world to which Perpetua belonged.”⁹ Her visions are a combination of her own experiences and imaginings that are deeply rooted in the Roman Africa and Carthage of the early third century CE.

The visions also participate in both the pagan and Christian literature circulating in Perpetua’s time. The first vision is full of parallels to both the canonical Bible and the Apocrypha (such as *The Shepherd of Hermas*).¹⁰ The complex literary nature of her text is apparent in the counterpoint between Perpetua’s first-person visions and the framing narrative that gives us the historical backdrop of what “really” happened.¹¹ In both parts, there is a heavy emphasis on the spokenness of the story. Perpetua both *sees* her visions and also *speaks* in them directly to God. When her brother (in Christ) asks her to request a vision about what is to happen, she says, with all confidence in herself, “And I, because I knew that I could converse with (*fabulari*) the Lord, whose great blessings I had experienced, promised my brother confidently and said to him: ‘Tomorrow I will report to you’” (4.2). And then she asked for (*postulavi*) the vision, which was given to her. Perpetua creates a discourse in which she acts as an intermediary between God and her Christian community; she is a prophetess who stands in the tradition of public Christian prophecy.¹²

In Perpetua’s first vision, she steps on the head of a serpent, climbs a ladder, and sees in an immense garden a godlike figure. The next two visions concern her dead brother, Dinocrates. A fourth and final vision

occurs on the day before her execution (*pridie muneris*, 10.15), and it is this vision (*Passio* 10) that has aroused the most interest. An examination of the key images and elements of this vision in their theological, philosophical, theoretical, and social contexts will reveal much about Perpetua's role as a woman and the portrayal of her as an athlete.

Perpetua's Fourth Vision

In this vision (*Passio* 10) Pomponius, the deacon, comes to the prison to get Perpetua. He leads her to the amphitheater, pledges that he will assist her ("I suffer with you," [*conlaboro tecum*"], 10.4), and then departs (just as Saturus does in the first vision). Perpetua sees a huge and boisterous (*adtonitum*, 10.5) crowd in the arena and is surprised to find no wild beasts attacking her. Instead she beholds an "Egyptian hideous in appearance" (*Aegyptius foedus specie*, 10.6) with his helpers (*adiutoribus*). Perpetua has her own assistants as well ("handsome young men also came out to be my helpers and supporters" [*adolescentes decori, adiutores et fautores mei*], 10.6). And then, she says, "I was unclothed and I became male" (*expoliata sum et facta sum masculus*, 10.7). My supporters began to rub me down with oil, the way they do before an athletic contest." Standing opposite her is her opponent, the Egyptian, rolling in the arena and covered in yellow dust (*afa*, 10.7). The Egyptian here presumably stands for the Devil, who was, she claimed, to be her true opponent the next day in her actual contest or *agôn*. Then another man appears, a paternal figure as in her first vision, so tall that he stood above the highest point of the amphitheater. He was clothed in purple robes and carrying a rod (*virga*), like an owner and trainer of gladiators (*lanista*, 10.8). This man is a Christ figure, there to present her to die in the amphitheater just as an *agônothetês* ("director of the games") might present gladiators for their own form of combat in the pagan games.¹³ So the contemporary writer Tertullian calls the Holy Spirit the *agônothetês*, the trainer of martyrs (*ad mart.* 3.3), saying to prospective martyrs, "you are going to submit to a good *agôn* in which the living God acts as the *agônothetês*, the Holy Spirit acts as *xystarchês* (director) . . . and Christ acts as your *epistatês* (steward)."¹⁴ The *lanista* in Perpetua's vision is also holding a green branch with golden apples.¹⁵ If Perpetua wins, she will get the green branch and apples; if not, she will be dispatched by the Egyptian.

Then ensues the brutally physical battle between Perpetua and the Egyptian, a *pancratium* with wrestling, punching, and kicking. Perpetua knocks the Egyptian down, trampling on his head (as she did the serpent in vision one and as Eve is promised she will do in Genesis 3:15) and winning the prize (10.12). The *lanista* kisses Perpetua and says to her, “daughter, peace be with you” (*filia, pax tecum*, 10.13), while the crowd cheers and her seconds sing psalms. Perpetua then begins to walk in honor and glory to the *Porta Sanavivaria* (the Gate of Life, which led to the Forum), through which victims and gladiators who were spared exited the arena; those who did not survive went through the *Porta Libitinensis* (the Gate of the Dead) on a *libitina* (bier).

This is the end of the vision and very nearly the end of Perpetua’s portion of the narrative. It only remains for her to interpret her dream, saying that at this point she awoke and understood that she would fight the next day not against the beasts (her sentence was *damnatio ad bestias* [condemnation to the beasts]) but against the Devil (*diabolum*, 10.14). She also understood that “victory was mine” (*sciebam mihi esse victoriam*, 10.14).

This dream has in it a number of standard images common to other visions and accounts of martyrdom, found in texts from the New Testament on and containing agonistic institutions of the day.¹⁶ But in the particular context of Perpetua’s life and narrative, the images and modes of expression take on a deeper and extraordinary meaning (especially given the early date of her narrative relative to other texts of the period).

First, in general, we can infer from the language here that the death of martyrs is viewed as a *munus*, a public entertainment (a combination here of athletic event and gladiatorial games, which were usually kept separate in Rome),¹⁷ a *munus* offered by God to communities which were accustomed to seeing a different kind of *munera*. In these *munera* (or *agônes*), God or Christ is the enactor of martyrdom, replacing the officials who in fact presided over the trials and executions. It is a “performance orchestrated by God,” with Roman officials acting as his unwitting assistants.¹⁸ These executions or performances were held in the most public places in the city, as both the martyrs and (sometimes but not always) local magistrates desired.

Second, there is the disturbing figure of the “Egyptian hideous in appearance” (*Aegyptius foedus specie*, 10.6), a figure that has occasioned spirited debate. Shaw sees this choice of word and image as “a simple

reflection of racism,” pointing out that the “Egyptians were the most despised, hated and reviled ethnic group in the Roman world—therefore an appropriate choice for a dark and satanic thing.” Byron gives evidence that Egyptians and Ethiopians were often associated with the devil and godlessness in biblical, patristic, and monastic texts.¹⁹ Others have seen the Egyptian as representing more than racist tendencies. The Egyptian nationality may have been chosen to indicate the various mystic and pagan cults that originated in the East (and the reigning emperor at the time, Septimius Severus, was a special worshipper of Serapis, an Egyptian god), cults that competed with Christianity as possible choices for the Romans. Egypt was thought to contain “a forbidden knowledge, a threat to the wisdom of the true God.”²⁰ Or, the Egyptian might symbolize a large and impressive athletic opponent, a representative of another threatening ethnic group parallel to the gigantic Ethiopian whom Heliodorus’ protagonist fought against in his novel, the *Ethiopica*.²¹

Finally, Perpetua’s fourth vision is imbued with the imagery and ideology of athletic contests and the important cultural embodiments associated with them: spectacles and spectators, the body, the gaze, moral virtues, philosophical discourse, and civic institutions. Martyrs were, from the time of the New Testament, cast as athletes.²² So Paul in I Corinthians compares Christians to runners and boxers who undergo strict training to win the prize, urging similar discipline and control upon those he addresses (I Cor. 9:24–27); elsewhere Paul compares the apostles to athletes in the arena: “For it seems to me God has made us apostles the last act in the show, like men condemned to death in the arena, a spectacle to the whole universe—to angels as well as men” (I Cor. 4:9).²³ In I Timothy, he says, “Run the great race of faith and take hold of eternal life” (I Tim. 6:12). Tertullian, in his *To the Martyrs*, casts Christians as spiritual athletes, comparing them to gladiators who are spurred on by their trainers and managers but also by others around them who have less experience in gladiatorial combat (Tert. *Ad mart.* 1.2). So, says Tertullian, he, although perhaps not entitled, is offering spiritual sustenance to the martyrs elect and exhorting them to act as athletes would and to discipline their bodies.²⁴ Two points are important for the experiences of Perpetua and her fellow catechumens. Tertullian makes it clear that prison is a perfect proving ground for the kinds of visionary experiences that Perpetua had and that the experience of being secluded in prison can

help in nurturing the spirit, which is still free, and in the practice of prayer.²⁵ Second, discipline or exercise (*askêsis*) must precede the conflict, both for the athlete and the martyr. Physical and mental discipline is essential to prepare the Christian athlete to meet his or her final challenge and to overcome all fears of the flesh; so Perpetua at her baptism was told by the Holy Spirit to ask only for “endurance of the flesh” (*sufferentiam carnis*, *Passio* 3.5).²⁶

Thus physical discipline was essential for would-be martyrs, these “mock gladiators,” to develop the mental discipline necessary to undergo the torments of their trials and passions. The term asceticism, taken from the Greek word *askêsis*, is transferred from the world of Greek athletics to the Christian world of the life of Christ and the martyrs who imitated Christ. The comparison of dying martyrs to athletes is ubiquitous in early Christian literature.²⁷

Athletes were supposed to embody the qualities of fortitude and endurance, and they were generally men of free status who achieved glory and honor (*timê*). It goes without saying, but it is important enough to reiterate, that the model or idea of the athlete was male. Fortitude, endurance, self-discipline, courage, restraint—all these qualities were associated with males, not females. So our female martyrs must be considered in this gendered context. Further, athletes and martyr-athletes were showcased in spectacles in the amphitheaters. Spectacle was an important element both in the public spaces in Rome—the arena, the amphitheater, the circus, the speaker’s rostrum—and in the combats and contests that the martyrs participated in. The Roman people wanted entertainment, and the magistrates were happy to oblige them. Spectacle contains within it a focus on both bodies and the gaze: Whose bodies were showcased and who controlled the gaze? Who were the spectators and who the objects of viewing? How were these roles constructed across gender lines?

It is important to remember that, even though the act of martyrdom was in its early stages in Perpetua’s time, it fit comfortably into previous social and cultural paradigms and institutions. Little about a martyr’s life and actions was construed *ex nihilo*. The martyrs’ roles and qualities were borrowed from athletes; their venue was the popular amphitheater. As Bowersock says, “such spectacles fit within a pre-existing social order that shaped them, just as the role of martyr as teacher and sophist similarly fits within a pre-existing social order that enabled philosophy and rhetoric to have so powerful an influence.”²⁸ Thus, although the religion

and the behavior were new, the cultural institutions that were put to the service of explaining them were not.²⁹

Throughout Perpetua's fourth vision, the imagery of the battle is used as a metaphor for Perpetua's struggle with her opponent (the Egyptian or the Devil), but in sections 10–11, the metaphor turns into reality as Perpetua actually becomes an athlete (in her vision) and fights a pancratium-style fight with the Egyptian, kicking, pounding, and trampling on his head.³⁰ Although this metaphor of the athletic contest, which often turned into reality in the arena, had before been applied almost entirely to men (particularly in the New Testament and church fathers), it is here used both of a woman and by a woman of herself. This is a striking departure from traditional use of the metaphor, and it leads us to some interesting questions about Perpetua's gender and sexuality. The brutality and physicality of the contests in which Perpetua and other female martyrs engaged would have been shocking to the onlookers³¹ and was almost equally shocking to the early church fathers, who had a difficult time explaining the unaccustomed courage of some early female martyrs like Perpetua.

The Martyr as Athlete: Endurance and Suffering

Let us look at how some of these traits manifest themselves in female athlete-martyrs like Perpetua and her predecessor, Blandina, who died in Lyons in 177 CE. Blandina was in many respects comparable to Perpetua but did not share her social status. While Perpetua was probably from a well-to-do and highly placed family, Blandina was a slave. Her martyrdom preceded Perpetua's by some twenty-six years, so in many ways she set the pattern for this kind of narrative (she is the only other female martyr singled out in this generation, although there were others who were martyred as part of a group).³² Blandina, like Perpetua, was one of a group of Christians arrested and publicly, brutally executed in an amphitheater. She was tied to a post and exposed to wild beasts, but no beast would approach her. She was returned to prison, then brought back on the last day of the gladiatorial games, saved (as so often for women) for the final denouement of the tortures. After the gauntlet of whipping and clubbing and being burned on hot coals, she was stripped naked, covered with see-through netting (like Perpetua after her), and exposed to a wild bull. She was gored, thrown, and then

died. Here is the description of her demeanor during her passion from the *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*:

. . . Blandina was filled with such power that even those who were taking turns to torture her in every way from dawn to dusk were wearied and exhausted. They themselves admitted that they were beaten, that there was nothing further they could do to her, and they were surprised that she was still breathing, for her entire body was broken and torn. They testified that even one kind of torture was enough to release her soul, let alone the many they applied with such intensity. Instead this blessed woman like a noble athlete got renewed strength with her confession of faith: her admission, "I am a Christian; we do nothing to be ashamed of," brought her refreshment, rest, and insensibility to her present pain.³³

Blandina proved to her tormentors and to the spectators that a woman and a slave could exhibit the kind of courage and fortitude that was typically ascribed to a male athlete. She was a force that disrupted all the assumptions about class and gender that governed Roman behavior and cultural norms. She also achieved the glory denied to her in life by playing the female role in a public spectacle. Her very public appearance at the end of the games showed that women were highly prized as objects of spectacles, largely because they afforded the opportunity to view the mutilation, violation, and penetration of the normally sheltered and honored female bodies.³⁴

Thus Blandina's and Perpetua's stories have many shared features. Both women exhibited the extraordinary courage normally expected of males, both were martyred last in their respective games, both endured sexual humiliation (public nudity, being dressed in see-through netting), and both were exposed to wild beasts. But in Perpetua's narrative, which, unlike Blandina's, is told in the first person, she portrays herself explicitly as an athlete competing with an Egyptian in a contest. In addition to courage and fortitude, another prime trait ascribed to athletes here and in many accounts is endurance (*patientia* in Cicero and Seneca, *hypomonê* in Greek texts), or the ability to resist.³⁵

This quality of passive endurance was one of the many characteristics that the Christians and pagans shared with each other or derived from one another. The shifts in the figuring and conceptions of gender

and power that are occurring in the early centuries of the Roman empire are given voice in the evolving sets of traits hypostatized by the terms *hypomonê* and *patientia*. During the early empire, and particularly in the rhetoric of the writers of the Second Sophistic,³⁶ the whole concept of fixed gender had been set free from its moorings, with the boundaries between male and female increasingly blurred and problematized.³⁷ The figures of the weighty, courageous, impermeable man and the weak, passive woman had been destabilized, and the weakening of these categories becomes clear in the way that the Romans both understood and changed the meanings of core concepts such as endurance/bravery/resistance.

Although Christian thought often put a different cast on such traits shared with their pagan counterparts, it is a mistake to assume that the Christians sharply differentiated themselves from the pagans whose writings held such antiquity and influence and who laid the groundwork for similar kinds of behaviors and roles. As Barton claims, the pagan Romans and the early Christians shared certain “psychological patterns and presumptions,” and thus we should not see pagan and Christian traits and values as totally at odds with each other.³⁸

The characteristic of resistance or endurance was mentioned and lauded in pagan authors of the period before Perpetua as a quality hitherto connected to female passivity and weakness but now legitimized as an admirable male trait. The Stoic philosophers, for example Seneca, who was contemporaneous with Jesus and Paul, and later Epictetus, emphasized the importance of mastery of emotions and control of the self and the will. Epictetus denigrates the body, constructing a “self” for whom pain, grief, and hardship had no effect.”³⁹ Seneca talks about endurance (*patientia*) as a means of resisting torture, but for him this trait is paradoxical and hard to place within the ranks of virtues. For Seneca, *patientia* is a “secondary virtue, one that only becomes apparent in conditions of adversity.”⁴⁰ It is, he says, a feminine virtue, and he compares endurance under torture to the joy of enduring the pains of childbirth (*Ep.* 28.14).

Seneca connects the moral virtue of endurance with both gladiators and athletes. Athletes endure bodily punishment not just in order to fight but so that they might fight better (*Sen. Ep.* 78.15–19).⁴¹ Endurance thus becomes here an *active* rather than a passive mode, one suited more to males than females (Seneca uses the word *muliebriter* [like a woman] here for the passive form of endurance).⁴² It is not mere endurance but

brave endurance that makes this quality a virtue. And endurance must have a *public* face.

Seneca also compares the kind of training that an athlete endures with the active role that a sufferer takes under torture, again lending to the quality of endurance a more manly and active aspect. Such a victim can challenge the torturer by actively using his or her body (Sen. *Ep.* 78.15–19). Thus Seneca draws a connection between athletes and victims of torture (or martyrs) in the kinds of virtues they need to display in order to prevail. He and others in this period also raise to a new level a virtue that had been hitherto a feminine virtue and in this way allow women to be figured in male terms. *Patientia* or *hypomonê* was not only something that a woman could display, but now was linked to *andreia* (manly courage), and therefore was something that men too could also display. Once it was reconceived in such a male context, it shifted to a new register of virtues and came to be something that women could aspire to—if they took on male characteristics.

But the quality of mind and spirit exemplified by the word *patientia* seems to have occupied a somewhat uneasy place in the philosopher's vocabulary. Just as it was rather confusingly applied both to males and females and to both admirable and undesirable traits, so it appears in several semantic registers in Latin and is used in a paradoxical way by Seneca and the Stoic philosophers.⁴³ It occupies a space somewhere between a virtue, in its similarity to *fortitudo* (courage) and *temperantia* (moderation), and a defect, which marked the feminine and the servile. The heroes who exhibit this kind of behavior are often the very kinds of people who were most despised by the Romans—athletes, gladiators, actors, and slaves—and for the philosophers, the wise man's willingness to suffer violation to his body seemed tantamount to the willingness to be penetrated that characterized the lowest elements in Roman society. Further, the word *patientia* could also describe the sexually submissive role in a male–male relationship or submission to unnatural lust.⁴⁴ So it is “on the one hand the self-ennobling standard of the Roman philosopher, who prided himself . . . on his capacity to endure the violation of his body . . . with an unflinching will,” but it is also “the mark of the un-man, of the Roman who is forced to accept the aggression of the other.”⁴⁵ *Patientia*, “endurance,” was thus not a trait that was universally admired, and clearly the martyrs were set into problematic roles in their comparisons with figures like athletes and gladiators.

We find in another classical writer of this period, the historian Tacitus, a figure who prefigures the female martyrs of the later second and third centuries and embodies the quality of active endurance that the philosophers described. Epicharis, a freedwoman (*libertina mulier*) who was arrested along with other Pisonian conspirators under Nero, was tortured for her suspected role in the conspiracy. She bravely endured her torture, setting a noble example (*clariore exemplo*), and defeated and humiliated her tormentors by her amazing endurance, while the knights and senators arrested with her, although not yet tortured, broke down and betrayed close family and friends (Tac. *Ann.* 15,57). Epicharis embodies the traits described by the earlier writers and found in many of the female martyrs we will discuss, including Perpetua.

Thus a quality earlier identified with the female or servile qualities of passivity and weakness was by Perpetua's time a practice and moral ideal that was coming to be admired, though still being refined and redefined, especially by the Christian writers. This can be seen in the pagan texts of the period, but in particular in many Christian texts, for example, the roughly contemporaneous text of 4 Maccabees (which can be dated to about the late first century CE).⁴⁶ During this period strategies of resistance were being developed to combat the imperial forms of rule in the Roman empire.⁴⁷ Such resistance, particularly by an individual and *in extremis*, is a marker for martyrs, especially male martyrs. While courage or manliness (*andreia*) was valued highly earlier as an active, masculine virtue, and endurance was considered a passive, feminine trait, sometime in this period the idea of endurance (*hypomonê*) underwent a radical shift in valuation. Now a male martyr, cast in the role of a contestant in an athletic contest (*agôn*), could also be admired for his power of endurance without being seen as suspect and womanish (odd as this may seem, given the Roman cultural values and the aggressive masculine atmosphere of the arena). In the broad scheme of sets of values assigned in general to men (active, penetrating, dominating, having the ability to inflict pain) and women (submissive, passive, open, suffering), the quality of endurance now straddles the divide. It was no longer contradictory to praise a male martyr-athlete by using this term. Both a male and female could now equally well be described as having this quality, which implied passivity (or resistance) but also the active engagement in using resistance to overcome one's enemy. It was thus not linked to the category "male" or "female" but rather constructed as a stance potentially taken by either sex. It was a

virtue that was denaturalized, participating in gender hierarchies while at the same time available to each.⁴⁸

In Perpetua's narrative, she was baptized while being held under guard and was told by the spirit to ask for nothing from the baptismal waters except for *sufferentiam carnis* (endurance of the flesh or physical endurance, 3.5).⁴⁹ This endurance was a quality highlighted in biblical texts and by the early church fathers in the context of Christian suffering from the first century CE on.⁵⁰ I Peter says, "there is honor in enduring pains of undeserved punishment, if it is done for the sake of God . . . the particular honor in the sight of God is enduring punishments *patiently* when you are being punished for having done what is right" (I Pet. 2:18–20).⁵¹ When such an ideology was picked up in the social–political context of Roman torture of the oppressed, especially martyrs, it lent increasing credibility to the quality of patient endurance.⁵² Ignatius (early second century), when he was condemned *ad bestias* ("to the beasts") and brought to Rome for his execution, states in a letter "I desire (or love) to suffer" (*agapô men gar to pathein*, Ign. Trall. 4.1). Ignatius explicitly connects the virtue of endurance (*hypomonê*) with the kind of training that an athlete or gladiator must endure to cope with suffering (Ign. Eph. 3.1).⁵³

The gendering of the quality of active endurance (*hypomonê*, *patientia*) is highly problematic, as is evident in Perpetua's fourth vision. The concept of a previously feminized virtue, now transferred to males but also potentially available to females, was complicated enough to force the church fathers and narrators of Christian texts into contorted explanations. The figure of the maternal body is, in the case of Perpetua and Felicity, overlaid onto the figure of the athlete or gladiator. It softens the boundaries between the categories—fixed in the pagan writers and again in the later church fathers when the church had been institutionalized—of male and female, slave and free. As Burrus points out, such a construction of male–female behavior "necessarily reinvokes, even as it also resists, a culturally dominant inscription of gender: to put it simply, these texts' reconfiguration of gender do not 'work' unless the female (thus also the 'Christian') retains her status as 'other.'"⁵⁴

Although the focus on endurance and suffering is widespread in writings of this period, there is a specific and unique focus in the Christian texts on suffering for Christ. The joy that the martyrs take in their suffering can only be explained in this context: They rejoice in

their sufferings because they are imitating Christ's sufferings. So the narrator reports that Perpetua and her fellow martyrs "went forth into the amphitheater as if it were to heaven, joyous, and with serene countenance; if they trembled, it was with joy and not with fear" ("processerunt de carcere in amphitheatrum, quasi in caelum, hilares, vultu decori; si forte gaudio paventes non timore", *Passio* 18.1). And the martyr Polycarp said, "Let us become followers of His endurance."⁵⁵ For the Christians, a focus on deeds is all-important. Tertullian, who contrasts the Christians to the classical philosophers like Seneca, argues that it is actions, not words, that are important and are proof of honor and truth. Seneca and others, he says, "may have preached the endurance of pain and death, but their words never find as many pupils as the Christians do through their deeds" (*nec tamen tantos inveniunt verba discipulos quantos Christiani factis*). Who, Tertullian says, when they see the *obstinatio* (resolution or steadfastness) of the Christians, does not join us and, "joining us, does not desire to suffer?" (*Tert. Apol.* 50.15).⁵⁶

Perpetua's Male Body

Let us go back for a moment and remind ourselves of what happened to Perpetua in her fourth vision. In this vision, after she came out to the arena and saw that she was to fight not wild beasts, as expected, but an Egyptian "vile in appearance," she was joined by handsome young men, her attendants. Then she was stripped (*expoliata sum*) and, she says, "I became male" (*facta sum masculus*, 10.7).⁵⁷ After this, she was rubbed with oil by her attendants ("as they do for a wrestling match"),⁵⁸ and then she and the Egyptian joined in a pancratium-like hand-to-hand combat, a vigorously physical battle that Perpetua eventually won, treading on his head.

This part of Perpetua's diary is puzzling and has yielded a great many interpretations (which often tell us more about the interpreters than about Perpetua). Why should Perpetua want to become male? Why should she seem to betray the very powerful female identity she had forged for herself in the face of various males she had to deal with (notably her father, but also the men who set the larger context in which she lived, namely the emperor, Septimius Severus, and local officials such as Hilarianus on the secular side, and the church officials such as Pomponius and Secundus on the religious side)? There are many

ways that we can view this transformation. Given the fact that in antiquity, the male body was considered the cultural and physical norm, it could be a “culturally conditioned affirmation of Perpetua’s ultimate victory.”⁵⁹ The culture in which Perpetua lived and which she inherited had long offered the superiority of the male as the overriding model to be followed, and biblical metaphors were likewise full of masculine images that underlined male superiority.⁶⁰ Male and female had, since classical times, become metaphors for moral qualities (where male equals strong, superior, and good, and female equals weak, inferior, and bad).⁶¹ A woman like Perpetua, who bore up bravely under torture and could fight with an opponent like the Egyptian, would be thought to be masculine.⁶²

The identifiers “male” and “female” became, as time went on, terms that indicated both sexes; either sex could be described by either term. Sex was transcended, and sexuality became fluid and temporary and could refer to a common human nature. The two terms came to describe less a static state or a sexualized category than a moral category. To “become female” was to become morally weak or degenerate; to “become male” was to attain a state of higher moral perfection (that is, the *vir perfectus* or *teleios anêr*).⁶³

By this reading, Perpetua’s male body indicates that she has been strengthened and will prevail—both in her contest with the Egyptian in her vision and the next day in the real contest against the beasts in the amphitheater and in her martyrdom. Perpetua is making herself conform to the male ideal of martyrdom as it is constructed by both the church and the Roman emperors. So perhaps Perpetua’s transformation into a man reflects her needing to be male in order to be in this contest,⁶⁴ and, as we have noted, Perpetua is described as an athlete, a typical, masculine mode of describing martyrs. These were the exemplars that Perpetua had to model herself on. The few female models that Perpetua and other North African female martyrs had were either non-Christian women like Dido and Cleopatra, whose suicide or destruction came as a result of male actions, or a Christian woman like Blandina, the earlier martyr mentioned before who is also described in male and athletic terms.⁶⁵

Two other possible and somewhat prevalent readings of this episode (which I do not accept) are quite disparate from each other. One school of critics, influenced by Freudian or Jungian psychoanalysis, sees psychological dimensions in Perpetua’s vision. One such scholar,

Robert Rousselle, sees Perpetua as a “deeply troubled, neurotic young woman” and her dreams as revealing much about her personality and motivations.⁶⁶ So, for example, Rousselle says that feet, which are emphasized in the contest between Perpetua and the Egyptian, might have a phallic connotation, with *galliculas* (“sandals”, *Passio* 10.2) referring to the Galli (eunuch priests of the goddess Cybele) and thus to the fact that the male wearers of these sandals are “little eunuchs.”⁶⁷ Likewise, Perpetua’s walk *per aspera loca et flexuosa* (10.3, “through rough and winding places”) could refer to genitalia, both female (landscapes) and male (hills and rocks), and wrestling is often a euphemism for sexual intercourse.⁶⁸

Another set of interpreters, the pragmatists, embed their analyses in the realien of the Greco-Roman world. So Louis Robert observed that “Perpetua was simply undressed and she became a man as is essential for this athletic combat” (“simplement Perpétue est déshabillée et elle devient homme comme il est indispensable pour ce combat athlétique”).⁶⁹ Or, as Shaw comments on Robert’s interpretation, “if Perpetua wished to engage in a pankration in the arena she had to become a male, and that is that.”⁷⁰

But surely Perpetua’s metamorphosis into a male figure conveys a far more interesting and complex story. The most compelling reading of *Passio* 10, where Perpetua becomes male, is embedded in the cultural conditions and constructions of a female becoming male. One important issue is point of view. Who is it that refers to women taking on male bodies? Although some women did refer to themselves as becoming male when they committed to the Christian life and faith, and Perpetua refers to herself this way in her narrative, this was much more often a male way of referring to women who showed courage and commitment and who thus took on male characteristics.⁷¹ So Palladius says that such women were “more like men than nature would seem to allow.”⁷² Women who aspired to union with Christ in martyrdom or by leading an ascetic life were also said to become male; in so doing they could attempt to transcend their previous identities and become one with Christ.⁷³ By such ascetic discipline, women could cloak their female bodies (which indicated weakness) and assume a virility of spirit.⁷⁴ Becoming male, in appearance, also had its practical uses for early Christian women; so Thecla cut her hair and put on men’s clothing to be able to travel with more freedom and avoid rape.⁷⁵ But this is “becoming male” in an overtly physical way, using disguise to gain one’s goal.

For women, courage, the decision to choose for themselves and renunciation of family and traditional ways constituted gender transgression when viewed through men's eyes.⁷⁶ Parents, mothers and fathers alike, were horrified by this behavior. We know that Perpetua's father was infuriated at Perpetua's stubbornness and independence (*Passio* 3.3: Perpetua says, "This word [Christian] so angered my father that he hurled himself at me as if he was going to pluck my eyes out"). And Thecla's mother, Theocleia, when she heard Thecla reject marriage and the expectations of family, said, "Burn the lawless woman! Burn the unmarried woman in the middle of the assembly so that all the women who have been taught by this man (Paul) may be afraid!" (*acts of Paul and Thecla* 20). It should be noted that it was not the male characteristics that critics despised (these were the norm, these marked higher levels of being), but rather women trying to act like men, against nature. There is a contradiction here and tension in those authors who discuss this transfer of gender qualities, for, even if it was unnerving for women to become men, still it was male traits that were admired by some observers whether they were acquired by males or females.⁷⁷ So Philo, a first-century CE philosopher, urged gender transformation so that the female could progress to a higher state: "Progress is nothing else than the giving up of the female gender by changing into the male, since the female gender is material, passive, corporeal, and sense-perceptible; while the male is active, rational, incorporeal and more akin to mind and thought."⁷⁸ The woman must, in order to achieve a more perfect state, appear virile, which is unnatural but still preferable to her retaining any feminine characteristics, either of body or soul.⁷⁹

One means for women to "become male" was to follow the path of asceticism. If women accepted voluntary celibacy and renounced family, marriage, property, husband, and children, they were, as Clark says, "inducted into a new status that elevated them above the deficiencies of the female condition."⁸⁰ Perpetua does just this; she has a nursing infant whom she hands over to her family, and her husband is an oddly missing element in her narrative.⁸¹ Perpetua moves from a state of dependency upon the men in her life and her family to a new definition of herself and a new independence.⁸² So Jerome, some two centuries after Perpetua, says that when a woman prefers Jesus Christ to a husband and children, "she will cease to be a woman and will be called a man." She would now be considered a man's equal, not his inferior; here Jerome quotes Paul that "in Christ Jesus there is no male and female."⁸³ Gender

distinction, characteristic of a human's fallen state, can be erased by redemption.

With sexuality and family relations removed, all that remains, says Jerome, is for women to "transcend their femaleness."⁸⁴ Women could achieve a higher status in the new Christian communities only by denying their sexuality in the quest for an ascetic life and virginity.⁸⁵

When women become men, this is the mark of holiness. This transformation can take many forms (cutting one's hair, acting in a masculine way, transvestism), but it does not often take the form of a complete, physical metamorphosis (even if in a dream or briefly) into a male body. And the transformation is not usually described in a narration, as here; it is more often a *fait accompli*.⁸⁶

There is disagreement among scholars over whether the casting off of the female refers to female *appearance* or female *sexuality*.⁸⁷ But we should look at Perpetua's language, her fluid gendering, and at what Augustine (an acute if biased reader of his fellow North African Perpetua) has to say on this subject (see Chapter 8). First, in Perpetua's narrative itself, Perpetua does not regard the change in her appearance or body as enduring;⁸⁸ as soon as the contest with the Egyptian is over, she returns to her original form as she approaches the *lanista* who gives her the branch with the golden apples, kisses her, and says to her "daughter, peace be with you" (*filia, pax tecum*). We should also take note here that Perpetua says *facta sum masculus*, ("I became male", 10.7), using the feminine form *facta*; thus in this moment, she was both male and female. In addition to complicating her transition to a male form by the use of this participle, Perpetua chooses to use for "male" not the word *vir* or *mas* but the less common word *masculus*. This word, with its diminutive ending, might indicate by its very form an ambiguity in the text about the strength and duration of the transformation.

There are three interesting uses of this word in classical Latin authors that might be instructive. Livy (31.12.6), in describing a strange portent accompanying the violation of a temple, says that among the Sabines was born a child of uncertain sex: "*incertus infans natus, masculus an femina esset*; 'another was found, age sixteen, whose sex could not be determined' (*ambiguo sexu*). Although *masculus* is used in opposition to *femina* here, it appears in a context of sexual ambiguity. Elsewhere, Horace, in *Epistles* 1.19.28, speaking of the poet Sappho, says that "masculine Sappho shapes her Muse with the meter of Archilochus" (*temperat Archilochi Musam pede mascula Sappho*). It is not easy to tell whether

mascula here is a term of praise or blame,⁸⁹ but certainly Sappho was a figure whose sexuality was often thought ambiguous.⁹⁰ And in Horace's *Epodes*, the author refers to the "masculine libido" (*masculae libidinis*, *Epode* 5.41) of the witch, Arimensian Folia. While it is not clear what exactly Horace means by *masculae* here, it may refer to a fearsome woman (or witch) who lusts after other women (such a woman would have been fearsome by her very nature). The word clearly marks Folia in some way as an unnatural character who acts in a manner contrary to normal gender expectations. I am not suggesting that the word *masculus* is used of Perpetua here to mark her as a woman who loves other women,⁹¹ but it is certainly a word full of sexual ambiguities that characterizes Perpetua—uneasily—as a woman who is acting, at this moment at least, in a manner that is not consonant with her conventional gender roles.⁹² The word *masculus*, then, seems to signal, both by its form and its semantic connotation and associations, a sexual ambiguity in Perpetua's transformation into a male body.

In the all but the final part of her narrative (only two short sections before the end), Perpetua has become a *filia*, and it is as a *woman* that she receives her reward. From her point of view, there has been no enduring change to her body. Apart from the fact that Perpetua "became male" in her fourth vision, her *sex* remains unchanged in the other parts of the narrative. But Perpetua's *gender* qualities vary widely throughout the account.⁹³ In addition to the gendered terms previously discussed, earlier in her narrative we see the same fluctuations of gender in Latin forms that Perpetua uses which prepare us for this sexual ambiguity. In the first section of the narrative (3.5), she says—referring to her whole group of four men and two women—*baptizati sumus* ("we were baptized"), using the masculine plural of the group. It would be normal in Latin for a woman to subsume her identity under the masculine plural if the group is mixed gender, but it is still noteworthy that she refers to herself here in the masculine plural, especially given the quick shift to feminine endings immediately afterward. Later, in this same section, she says *numquam experta eram tales tenebras* ("I had never experienced such a dark place before"), 3.5), using the feminine singular. Similarly in the same section (section 3), she says "benedicti diaconi . . . constituerunt praemio uti paucis horis emissi in meliorem locum carceris refrigeraremus" ("those saintly deacons arranged our transfer for a few hours—and for a price—into the better part of the prison, where we could have some relief", 3.7), again using

the generalizing masculine plural of the group; this is quickly followed by *sollicita pro eo adloquebar matrem* ("Anxious for him [the baby], I spoke to Mother", 3.8).⁹⁴

So Perpetua tends to subsume her identity under the masculinizing plural when she identifies as a part of the group (as would be standard practice), but when she extracts herself and becomes an individual writing her own story, the descriptive adjectives and participles all take feminine endings. The main point at which this grammatical gendering is called into question is her statement *facta sum masculus* (10.7).

Thus Perpetua makes spiritual progress both by social adaptation, moving away from her natal family, and physical adaptation, in becoming male (at least in her dream vision), but from her point of view, there has been no enduring change to her body. She remains female despite her actions, which are often dominant and controlling. A further point is that the representation of Perpetua in her narrative (as a nursing mother) and her companion Felicitas (as pregnant and giving birth while in prison) highlights the maternal body, which is featured in contemporary debates about Christ's birth.⁹⁵ In the *Passio*, Perkins says, Perpetua and Felicitas "win glory and renown . . . through their heroic *bodily witness*" (my emphasis).⁹⁶

Interpreting the Body

Augustine (354–430 CE, about two centuries after Perpetua) wrestled with the problems of the theological implications of Perpetua changing into a man's body.⁹⁷ He wrote several sermons on Perpetua, which were each delivered on separate anniversaries of Perpetua's martyrdom.⁹⁸ Augustine asks why this day is remembered for Perpetua and Felicitas and not for the males who were martyred with them. It was "not because females outshone men for the worthiness with which they bore themselves, but because the weakness of women conquered the old enemy more marvelously, and a masculine virtue (*virilis virtus*) struggled to win perpetual felicity."⁹⁹ How, he asks, could she have achieved this martyrdom? He finds the cause in her fourth vision where she changed into the body of a man. In another text, he says about Perpetua, "Who could doubt that it was her soul that was in that likeness of the body and not her body? And while retaining its feminine sex, her body was lying asleep in bed, when her soul was wrestling in that likeness of a man's

body? . . . Was that likeness of a man a real body? Or was it not a body, though it bore the likeness of a body? . . . If it was a body, why did it not retain the form of its covering (*vaginae*)? After all, it did not find in the flesh of that woman male sex organs, by which it could be formed as it became more dense and, as you say, ‘congealed.’”¹⁰⁰

So Augustine was troubled by the question of what “turning into a man” meant. He solved the problem by saying that her body remained the same but only her mind (or spirit) changed.¹⁰¹ Perpetua still had her femaleness (her sexuality), as is clear since it reappeared after her brutal (and very physical) contest. One can see that Augustine was in a bind. He did not want to admit that one’s mind or spirit could change sexes, but that seems to have been less frightening and disturbing than a body changing into another form. The description of Perpetua’s battle with the Egyptian (that is, the Devil) strongly implies that Perpetua took on masculine characteristics in her intensely physical battle—how else could a woman have engaged in a *pancratium*? Some critics maintain that church fathers such as Augustine and Quodvultdeus (bishop of Carthage in the fifth century; his dates are unclear but he died around 450 CE), in proposing the idea that female martyrs became male not in body (impossible except in Perpetua’s vision) but in spirit, were denying the body any importance.¹⁰² I would argue that, to the contrary, men like Augustine gave great importance to the symbolism of the body and were afraid of the consequences of such a gender transgression.¹⁰³ So Quodvultdeus (or someone writing at his time), says of Perpetua, wondering why she acted the way she did: “She was an adolescent, in the most fecund years, in that age most prone to love (*amor*) . . . when the fevers of the flesh are commonly thought to be greater than any divine charity. But, because of God’s grace, she spurned her new body, her new strength, and so was able to exercise the powers of a young man.”¹⁰⁴ Thus Perpetua was able to overcome her inherent feminine fragility and passions with the help of the grace of God and by ignoring or casting off her own, developing womanly body.

It is clear that the body is a very important biological and cultural force throughout the *Passio* and other tales of Christian martyrs, and Perpetua, as author, highlights the use and abuse of her body often: the maternal body, the filial body, the martyr’s or victim’s body, the sexualized body, the athlete’s body. The body is, in the end, something that a person can control, even (or especially) a person who is a victim or a woman, and through it, one can control the spectators and the gaze

(or who is the perceiver and who the object of perception). For both the martyr and the athlete, the body is on display. Roman culture was focused heavily on the spectacular, and, although Christianity opposed the grisly spectacles offered in the civic settings of the amphitheater and elsewhere, nonetheless the church soon had its own form of spectacles to offer.¹⁰⁵ The *Passio* of Perpetua is full of the spectacle and pageantry of the games, and the martyrs' tales contained ample material for the liturgical performances of the church, performances that offered an alternative to the profane forms of entertainment.

Such a performance venue highlighted how the body was deployed, what role the spectators played, how the victim comported himself or herself, and who controlled speech and action. According to the standard cultural norms, the spectators were in the position of power and could enjoy seeing their values enforced by watching the victims, the martyrs, suffer violence in front of their eyes. But the martyrs changed these rules by seizing power for themselves and using their bodies to resist the torture inflicted upon them.¹⁰⁶

In the spectacle of the amphitheater the martyrs walked in under the gaze of all who were present. The editor of Perpetua's narrative, in his own description of their final moments, their passions, tells us that the five martyrs walked in, with the men first and Perpetua at the end.¹⁰⁷ The three men (Revocatus, Saturninus, and Saturus) "kept threatening the gawking crowd" (*populo spectanti comminabantur*, 18.7). The martyrs were joyful (*hilaes*), their faces composed (*vultu decori*, 18.1). Perpetua came, her face radiant (*lucido vultu*) and her pace calm (*placido incessu*, 18.2), like Christ's wife (*matrona Christi*) and God's beloved (*Dei delicata*), "casting down the gaze of all with her piercing eyes" (*vigore oculorum deiciens omnium conspectum*, 18.2). This detail is important: Perpetua, the victim (who also wins a dispute with the tribune about wearing the pagan costumes of Saturn and Ceres into the arena, 18.4–6), resisted the stares of the spectators with her own flashing gaze. Perpetua's aggressive gaze here breaks with the conventional attitude and demeanor of a proper *matrona*.¹⁰⁸ Perpetua was thus appropriating legitimacy for herself and asserting her agency and subjectivity.¹⁰⁹

A further attempt was made to demean and disempower Perpetua and Felicitas by bringing them to the arena naked, dressed in see-through netting (20.2), a spectacle that horrified even the eager crowd (especially since Perpetua was a nursing mother and Felicitas had just

given birth, 20.2). The punishment of young women martyrs by rape, prostitution, and other sexually related punishments such as public nudity was common fare in the early Christian period.¹¹⁰ The purpose of such strategies was to remove dignity, power, and autonomy from them.¹¹¹ Here, as in other martyr stories, the voyeuristic gaze of the audience is both provoked (by having the martyrs first appear nude and in netting) and then denied (by bowing to the crowd's demands and bringing them back in unbelted robes (*discinctis indutae*, 20.3); they are still, however, unbelted and so not dressed as Roman *matronae* would be.¹¹² In other martyr tales, girls who are forced to be publicly naked are miraculously covered up when their hair grows long.¹¹³ Thus in these stories and in Perpetua's, the martyrs' bodies are both sexualized and sacralized. The deaths of these women, described in excruciating and titillating detail, are often riddled with sexual metaphors.¹¹⁴ Such sexualized punishment and the manipulation and penetration of female bodies had a long history going back to mythological figures such as Polyxena and also to figures in ancient novels such as Leucippe and Clitophon.¹¹⁵ Such women die by being penetrated by the sword, often in a highly and overtly sexualized way. Perpetua (whose death is less sexualized than Agnes' but still follows in this tradition), according to her editor's account, "screamed when the sword stabbed her in the bone."¹¹⁶ Then, when the hand of the novice gladiator hesitated, she herself guided it to her throat" (21.9).¹¹⁷

Perpetua dies, as she lived, by taking control. Unlike Agnes, she is not given a submissive, virginal end (except by her editor, who makes her modestly cover herself when her robe is torn and pin up her hair when she is thrown by the wild cow, 20.4–5). In her own narrative, she repudiates every male position except that of the church, becomes an intercessor, talks the Roman guards and soldiers into relenting on matters of prison conditions and dress for the amphitheater, and acts and talks like a woman empowered. It is largely in the accompanying narrative by her editor and in later church fathers who comment on her life and narrative that we see a more feminine and conventional Perpetua.

The Martyr as Athlete

The figure of the athlete, a model and metaphor for Christian martyrs, helps us to reconcile the different characteristics and behaviors of

Perpetua. The Greek writer Eusebius, in his account of the martyrs of Lyons, says that many Christians were abused, beaten, and stoned; a group of them was executed. According to Eusebius, the Christians endured the attacks in a noble manner (*gennaiôs hypemenon*, HE 5.1.7). He calls the martyrs “athletes of piety” (*eusebeias athlêtôn*) and says that he will record for everlasting remembrance “their valor (*andreia*) which dared so much, trophies won from demons, their victories (*nikai*) against unseen opponents, and the crowns (*stephanoi*) for all these things” (HE 5.Pr.). Eusebius continues, describing the successful martyrs with an appeal to athletic models: “the first martyrs were clearly ready . . . but some others were clearly untrained and weak, and not able to endure the exertion of a great contest” (HE 5.1.11). Blandina, the aforementioned martyr and slave, resists courageously, “wins the contest, and is hailed as a noble athlete (*gennaios athlêtês*) like a fellow male martyr, Maturus, who is called a noble contestant” (*gennaion agônistên*, HE 5.1.17).

Thus the athlete was a cultural symbol embodying admired traits recognizable to all who came to events in the amphitheater. Because women were so often represented in terms of their bodies, this metaphor was easily transferable to the female martyrs as well. And this was true especially if she was represented as a “virile woman,” whose body, having triumphed over men, is the site of power. But this comparison also raised questions about the position of the female martyr. Her characteristic quality of *patientia* (or *hypomonê*) was not a trait that was universally admired or unproblematic. It occupied a space between a virtue (*fortitudo*) and a defect that marked the feminine and the servile. Those who exhibited this kind of behavior were often the very people most despised by the Romans (athletes, gladiators, sexually submissive males). So the martyr, and especially the female martyr, in being compared to classical figures of strength but low social status, was cast into the problematic and liminal role of someone who was both admired and despised.

A Matter of Genre and Influence

The Passio and Greco-Roman Pagan and Christian Narratives

A Matter of Genre

It has long been regarded as important by scholars and readers of martyr acts and their close cousins, the Greek novel, the Christian novel, the New Testament Book of Acts, the apocryphal acts of the apostles, and the apocryphal Gospels, to discover what generic category they inhabit or what name exactly we should give to them. Are they history or fiction? Novels or romances? Martyr narratives or judicial accounts? Apocryphal acts or biblical tales rooted in a particular time and culture? And are these rubrics or descriptors necessarily dichotomous? Is fiction always “false” and history always “true”? Further, how do we decide what each category or rubric means? For example, the apocryphal acts may be considered “novels” because they share many things with the Greek novels: their form, substance, and narrativity.¹

Martyr narratives such as the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* are at the heart of the history versus fiction debate. These narratives took two different forms: judicial records of trials (the earlier martyr acts) and literary accounts of martyrdoms that are stylized, rhetoricized, and brought into a narrative matrix that may include the novel and the apocryphal acts. Like the novel and the apocryphal acts, they belong to no one recognizable literary genre but cross boundaries, partaking of

different forms and exhibiting an enormous fluidity that makes them very hard indeed to pin down.²

We might ask why we need the category “genre” at all. It is, as Morales points out, an organizing category, one that helps us to set our horizons and expectations for the narrative as it unfolds (and I refer to genres here only for that reason since the various kinds of works I discuss in this chapter cannot be easily categorized). If we know that a work is an epic or comedy, we know what to expect.³ Readers and scholars feel more comfortable when they know whether they are reading within a genre, across genres, or against a genre. We assign value to different genres (so we speak of “high” and “low” literature), thus insisting that some are more important and more easily recognizable, others less significant and less worthy of our attention.⁴

The word “fiction” has borne the brunt of this debate. Traditionally fiction implies falsehood or invention and has been seen as the opposite of history.⁵ Further, in classical scholarship, fiction is often applied to the ancient novel, which is seen as having few or no historical referents and as therefore distinct from martyr narratives, which are usually regarded as having some basis in an historical event. The Gospels and the apocryphal acts, which are rooted in biblical events, fall perhaps somewhere in the middle.

The work of G. W. Bowersock has had a major impact on this debate. His 1991 Sather Lectures culminated in his book *Fiction as History: Nero to Julian*.⁶ Bowersock’s book begins with a dialog from Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel, *The Master and Margarita*:

“Your story is extremely interesting, Professor, but it differs from the accounts in the gospels.”

“But surely,” replied the professor with a condescending smile, “you of all people must realize that absolutely nothing written in the gospels actually happened . . .”

“I agree . . . , but I’m afraid that no one is in a position to prove the authenticity of your version either.”

“Oh yes! I can easily confirm it!” rejoined the professor “The fact is”—here the professor glanced round nervously and dropped his voice to a whisper—“I was there myself.”

This short dialog cuts to the heart of “history” (what “actually happened”), authenticity, and personal verification. The texts in question here are

the Gospels, but it could be another text—a martyr narrative, for example, or even an ancient novel. Bowersock describes the world of the second-century Roman empire, a time when “the boundaries between creative imagination and willful mendacity, between fiction and lying, often proved impossible to determine.”⁷ Of course the boundary between myth or legend and actual events had long been blurred, without much notice, but the importance of verifying events became more important as Christianity took hold and generated its own sets of texts and narratives.

The relationship among the many kinds of narratives, both secular and Christian, that were being produced in the first three centuries CE is difficult to disentangle. During this period arise a great many works, all somehow related to each other: among them, the New Testament Book of Acts, the Gospels, the apocryphal Gospels,⁸ the apocryphal acts, the ancient secular novel, the Christian novel, and the martyr narratives. These have among them many more similarities than we might imagine in writings so different in terms of style, subject matter, and cultural background. Each one breaks the boundaries of expectation and defies attempts to set it in a known genre. The dating of each of these narrative forms is uncertain enough that it is not possible to construct a genealogy of dependence.

Complicating the picture further is the existence of other works in fragmentary form or classical works that may have been influential on the later narratives. Apart from the five complete Greek novels (and two later Roman novels by Petronius and Apuleius), there exist many fragmentary Greek novels, dating from the first century to the early fourth century CE,⁹ and some of these certainly would have preceded the apocryphal acts. Each subgenre contains many different works that date from different periods so that we cannot consider all the apocryphal acts or all the novels as coming from one period.

It is entirely possible to argue that, for example, either the apocryphal acts influenced the novel or vice versa (the latter is the prevailing view of most scholars).¹⁰ Thus the lines of influence go from pagan to Christian and back again in such a way that any linear pattern of influence is impossible to determine.¹¹

Another group of texts that were not produced in the first–fourth centuries CE but that could well have had some influence on the later narratives, particularly the martyr texts, are the pagan or classical death scenes of figures such as Socrates, who is sometimes referred to as a

martyr.¹² Although such early classical figures fall outside the purview of this text, they clearly were influential on early martyr texts.¹³

The major texts in question here—the Gospels, the apocryphal acts, the Greek novels, and the martyr narratives—are all marked by a fluidity or openness that makes it very difficult to identify an original text from which they came. We can also add to this list of works the Alexander Romance and the Jewish novellas such as *Esther*, *Joseph and Aseneth*, and *Daniel*.¹⁴ All or most of these texts display certain characteristics in common: a structural fluidity, in which each manuscript includes different versions of the story, deleting or adding individual episodes; many translations into different languages which yield different versions of the same story; (often) an anonymous author; a lack of fixed titles; or relationship to an oral tradition or a performative basis.¹⁵ As Halporn notes, such texts, and in particular the Acts of the Martyrs, cannot be evaluated against the norms of standard literary texts; he quotes Delehaye's comment that "L'état d'instabilité des textes, est, en hagiographie, une sorte de loi du genre."¹⁶

Although many of the characteristics of "fluid" texts are applied by Christine Thomas mainly to the apocryphal acts, the Jewish novellas, and biographical historical novels (such as the Alexander Romance), we might consider a martyr narrative such as the *Passio Perpetuae* in much the same light. First, it has proved impossible to try to construct an ur-text out of the many later manuscripts and versions both of the *Passio* and the *Acta*.¹⁷ The ten manuscripts (nine in Latin, one in Greek) of the *Passio* and the many manuscripts of the *Acta*¹⁸ differ in a number of respects, especially in details of plot and substance (see Chapter 1). Perpetua's story is thus in flux from the very beginning as far as we can tell. Second, it has proved impossible to determine which version of the *Passio*, the Greek or the Latin, is prior. It is clear that one is not a translation of the other since they vary in detail and mode of expression, but opinion clearly differs on priority (see Chapter 1 for details and bibliography). Once again, this muddies the issue of the ur-text. Third, the text of this martyr narrative clearly evolved from an original (which may have been simply a trial transcript such as we find in other martyr texts such as the Scillitan martyrs), with layers of rhetorical and literary stylization added as time went on.¹⁹ This was largely because the *Passio* quickly became a favorite text in church liturgy and a part of an oral or performative tradition in the later church, repeated over and over again, never quite canonical

but regularly performed as part of a sermon by church figures like Augustine (see Chapter 8). Although we understand that the *Passio* was read each year on Perpetua's feast day, March 7, it must have undergone changes as time went on; each retelling of her story would have produced a change in it.

Thus the *Passio* shares many characteristics with other roughly contemporaneous texts that are equally hard to assign to a genre.²⁰ We discuss in the next section the particular affinities between and among the *Passio*, the apocryphal acts, and the Greek novel, addressing both the fluid boundaries of these works and the lines of influence from classical-pagan to Christian and back again. The one thing that they all have in common is their inability to be pinned down to one particular category, either individually or as a group of texts that are marked by similar characteristics. In the end this may not matter, but readers and scholars seem to feel more comfortable if they can place a work in a generic category and thus assign to it certain characteristics on that basis.

*Dating of the Apocryphal Acts, the Greek Novel,
the Christian Novel, And the Passio*

The chain of influence among these various works depends to a great extent on when each one was written. But dating any one of them has proved difficult, so we cannot hope to place them in any sort of meaningful chronological order. No two scholars can agree on when the works within a category (e.g., the novel) were written; no less can they set one category against another to gauge the patterns of borrowings. For a long while, the one point of general agreement was that the pagan or polytheistic works must have influenced the apocryphal acts. But a few scholars have taken issue with even that proposition.²¹ However we configure the appearance and intersection of the Gospels, the apocryphal acts, the polytheistic novels, and the Christian novel, martyrologies appeared early on and seem to have largely replaced the Christian novel.²²

For purposes of clarification, I will try to assign a rough chronological period to the works in each of these categories so that we can get some sense of the relationship in which they stood to the other works from which they drew inspiration or which they inspired. We must also keep in mind that the works within a category were not necessarily from one period; the five Greek novels vary widely in their dates as do the

apocryphal acts. It is also the case that continuity and innovation can happen simultaneously.²³

It seems reasonable to assume that the apocryphal acts were written—following on the Gospels of the first century—in the second or early third century. We have five major apocryphal acts, composed in Greece, Asia Minor, or Syria, in roughly the same period: the acts of John, Peter, Paul, Andrew, and Thomas.²⁴ The acts of John, Peter, and Paul seem to be the earliest (between 160 and 200 CE), and the acts of Thomas a bit later, in the early to mid-third century. The acts of Andrew fall perhaps in between those periods.²⁵ Although the apocryphal acts were not all written at the same time, they share a common set of motifs: Each focuses on one important figure (the apostle), and each highlights sexual continence or abstinence and the effects that the desire for continence had on the marriage of the woman in the narrative who has converted to Christianity. Most end with the death of the apostle.²⁶

The five major Greek novels that are wholly preserved are equally hard to date, and scholars still do not agree on more than the broadest chronological boundaries. As Hägg says, “The controversy is not about decennia, as in the case of other ancient works of literature, but about centuries.”²⁷ There is little external evidence to help us here. The novels in question are Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, Xenophon of Ephesus’ *Ephesiaca*, Longus’ *Daphnis and Chloe*, Achilles Tatius’ *Leucippe and Cleitophon*, and Heliodorus’ *Ethiopica*. These novels should probably not be thought of as beginning this genre but rather as coming at the end of the development of the novel.²⁸ Chariton is now regarded as the oldest of them (dating perhaps to the early second century CE and perhaps even to the first century BCE).²⁹ Most of the other novels probably date to the second century, with Heliodorus thought to be later, perhaps third or fourth century CE.³⁰ Most scholars agree that Heliodorus brings the development of the novel to a close. Thus most of the apocryphal acts and the five preserved Greek novels were produced in roughly the same chronological period, and perhaps in the same cultural milieu, the period from about 100 to 250 CE, although some of the fragmentary novels are earlier than this, and the rise of the novel must have preceded the formation of the apocryphal acts.³¹

Two other types of work that that spring from about the same time period and are clearly somehow related to the apocryphal acts and the Greek novel are the second–third-century CE Christian novel known as the *Clementine Recognitions* (or by some as the *Pseudo-Clementine*

Recognitions) and the Acts of the Martyrs. The *Clementine Recognitions* has been called “the first genuine Christian novel.”³² Although we can see clear connections between the *Clementine Recognitions* and some of the Greek novels, the provenance of the *Clementine Recognitions* is hazy. There are two parts to the work (the other is titled *Homilies*), and, although each survives from the fourth century CE (*Homilies* in Greek, *Recognitions* in Latin), the common Greek original of both dates from the second–third centuries.³³ Thus this earliest Christian novel, which bears a relationship in its recognition motif to the Greek novels, emanates from around the same period as the apocryphal acts and the Greek novels.

And what of the martyr acts? It is difficult, as with the apocryphal acts and the Greek novels, to treat these as having one common narrative or date since they vary widely in both respects.³⁴ Our earliest extant martyr acts date from the second century: the letter from the martyrs of Lyons and Vienne in 177 CE, the Scillitan martyrs at the end of the second century (these are our earliest extant martyrs from North Africa), and the accounts of Polycarp (second or third century) and Pionius (third century).³⁵ It is hard to know when the word martyr began to be used in the sense of a Christian who died for his or her faith and not a “witness” as it originally designated. According to Bowersock, the earliest attested use of “martyr” in the sense of one who finds “death at the hands of hostile secular authority” is in the martyrdom of Polycarp; Moss would argue that the concept of martyrdom existed before there was a term to designate it in Christian thought.³⁶

Whenever we date the beginning of the martyr acts or however we define them, it appears that there were narratives of martyrdom circulating from the time of the New Testament and then in nonbiblical form from about 150 CE onward. They varied in format: some were judicial proceedings (Scillitans); some letters (Lyons and Vienne); some first-person narratives (*Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*); some third-person narratives (Polycarp). Thus, by the time of Perpetua, some early martyr acts existed, but Perpetua’s text was one of the earliest and was influential on those that came after. Eventually the accounts of these martyrdoms were read as liturgy; the third Council of Carthage in 397 CE states that “it is also permitted to read the passions of the martyrs, when their anniversaries are celebrated.”³⁷

The early flourishing of this genre, then, coincides with the writing of many of the Greek novels, the apocryphal acts, and the *Clementine*

Recognitions. All were being produced and circulated in very much the same 100–150-year timespan.

The Apocryphal Acts

We look now at several of the major types of narratives produced in the first three centuries CE in order to see what they have in common with each other and, most important, whether the martyr narratives share features of these other contemporaneous classes of narratives. It is not always easy or possible to keep the apocryphal acts and the Greek novels in separate categories for they share many characteristics; in the end asking what genre these narratives belong to is posing the wrong question or posing the right question in the wrong terms.³⁸

The acts of John, Peter, Paul, Andrew, and Thomas were composed in the second-third centuries, with John, Peter, and Paul being the earliest and Thomas the latest and most completely preserved.³⁹ All five share some common themes: Each focuses on one apostle, who is the lead character and becomes a rival in a triangle with a female convert and her husband, lover, or fiancé, and each one shines a clear light on the desire for continence on the part of the female convert, a desire which allies her to the apostle and separates her from her husband, lover, or fiancé. The male partners of these women vent their anger at the apostle or woman for the conversion of the women to chastity.⁴⁰ Most apocryphal acts end with the death of the apostle (except for John). The main characters (the apostles) are, unlike the main characters in the novels, not from the nobility and the elite but ascetic, itinerant disciples of Christ.

The apostle and his convert come up against a male antagonist, who might be a member of the Roman government (and a lover or husband). The plots of the apocryphal acts seem to reflect the social values of ordinary Christians of this period. Like the martyr narratives, but unlike the Greek novels, the desired end in the apocryphal acts is death, in this case the death of the apostle but also perhaps of the female convert who wishes to follow this path.⁴¹ The desire to follow the preaching apostle and to die, or at least to end the marriage, runs against every social value of the second-third-century Roman empire; the characters in the apocryphal acts aim to break from their social context, and they espouse a philosophy that poses a genuine danger to their societies. We can contrast this with the novel, which ends, pleasingly, in marriage,

a socially approved device for bringing women under the control of a male-dominated society and an acceptable ending for these novels.

The rejection of marriage in the apocryphal acts is not a rejection of abusive or failed relationships. Indeed many of the marriages or relationships depicted in these stories seem loving and devoted, with husbands desiring the one thing that their wives are no longer willing to give: sexual relations within a chaste marital union. So, in the acts of Andrew, the husband, Aegeates, is clearly confused by his wife Maximilla's refusal to have normal sexual relations. While Andrew regards sexual relations as "a polluted and foul way of life" and Maximilla thinks them an "unclean union," Aegeates says: "I touch your feet, a man who has lived with you as my wife for twelve years now. I have ever treated you as a goddess, and still do, because of your prudence and the rest of your character, which is honorable."⁴²

Another such female heroine and her rejected and puzzled husband inhabit the acts of Thomas. Mygdonia falls under the spell of the apostle Thomas and then refuses to have any intimacy with her husband, Charisius, or even to dine with him. Charisius tries all manner of persuasion and finally force in order to recover his wife, then threatens revenge on the apostle, enlisting the king, Misdaeus, as his ally. Having put Thomas in prison, Charisius expects his marital life to resume, but he finds his wife with "her hair shorn and her garments rent." In frustration, he cries, "My lady Mygdonia, why does this cruel sickness hold thee fast? . . . I am thy husband from thy virginity, and both the gods and the laws give me (the right) to rule over thee. What is this great madness of thine, that thou art become a laughing-stock in all our nation?"⁴³ Mygdonia's intransigence causes Charisius to perform every available kind of behavior so as to restore his marriage and order to his household: cajoling, sexual violence, claims of husbandly rights, doubt and despair, fear of social embarrassment and loss of honor and prestige, promises of riches and social standing, and offers to possibly set the apostle free. Nothing changes Mygdonia's mind; indeed, she believes that Charisius is mad. In the end, the apostle is put to death, and both Mygdonia and the king's wife, Tertia, become converts, cannot be persuaded to recant, and are allowed to live as they desired.⁴⁴

There are variations on the theme of the female convert's rejecting her husband to pursue complete continence and follow an apostle. In the acts of John, first the apostle heals a noble woman named Cleopatra and resurrects her husband Lycomedes, who has died of despair over his

wife's near death. Both become John's disciples. Later in John, we find another twist on this theme. Drusiana, married to Andronicus, lives with her husband in chastity and all seems well. But then another man, Callimachus, falls in love with her, pursues her, and contributes to her death, which is brought on by her disgust at Callimachus' lust. This too ends happily when she is resurrected, and even the lustful Callimachus converts. So in this story we have two married couples, all four converts, living in chastity. Here alone in the apocryphal acts is the Christian value system in harmony with the established social order.

The apocryphal acts provide us with many parallels to early Christian martyr and persecution narratives.⁴⁵ In the apocryphal acts we find stories centered on women, who defy both their husbands or fiancés and the social conventions of their times and places, by renouncing married life and sexual acts in favor of adherence to religious devotion and a male apostolic figure.⁴⁶ Whether these stories had any basis in reality, the pattern is repeated often enough to make us believe that there were historical women in the second–third centuries who behaved in this way. Further, the prevalence of such stories and experiences gives credence to the belief that Perpetua's husband is absent from her tale because she left him to follow the path of abstinence and devotion to the Christian faith. Other parallels emerge that we should be attentive to: a combination of asceticism and continence with an eroticism in the devotion of the heroines to the apostles or to Christ in the *Passio*;⁴⁷ the subversion of Roman social *mores* and authority; the valorization of death and martyrdom; an emphasis on otherworldly matters; and an aversion to paternal authority figures.

With these parallels in mind, let us look now at the Greek novel, another class of works written in roughly the same time period as the apocryphal acts and the *Passio*.

The Greek Novel

The Greek novels, like the apocryphal acts, vary in the dates assigned to them; both categories of works fall roughly into the period between 100 and 250 CE. Although they operate contemporaneously, the rise of the novel certainly predates the apocryphal acts.⁴⁸ Both types of fiction share certain characteristics and motifs: marriage and rivalry, jealousy, tests of the fidelity of the partners, travels and adventures, chastity under

siege, beautiful female characters, miracles performed, dreams, visits to jail, resistance to flattery, and threats.⁴⁹

The five Greek novels are Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, Xenophon of Ephesus' *Ephesiaca* (*An Ephesian Tale*), Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Cleitophon*, and Heliodorus' *Ethiopica* (*An Ethiopian Tale*). The outline of the romance plots in these and other novels is nicely summed up by Reardon in his collection of these novels:

Hero and heroine are always young, wellborn, and handsome; their marriage is disrupted or temporarily prevented by separation, travel in distant parts, and a series of misfortunes, usually spectacular. Virginity or chastity, at least in the female, is of crucial importance, and fidelity to one's partner, together often with trust in the gods, will ultimately guarantee a happy ending.⁵⁰

The stories can focus more on love or on adventure, and can be fictional or realistic, solemn or comic in tone.

As has been mentioned, the Greek novel, or romance, has been compared to both the apocryphal acts and the Christian martyr acts. But what do such stories of passionate young love interrupted by calamities, pirates, torture, crucifixion, attempted rape, disemboweling, dangerous sea voyages, political rivalry, physical spousal abuse, suspended animation and near death, and being sold into slavery have to do with religious texts in which continence and devotion to an apostle or to God are the main events? While we cannot sort out precisely the chronology or the lines of influence among the three classes of writing (apocryphal acts, Greek novel, and Christian martyr acts) because of a lack of evidence (internal or external) and the widespread time periods that each type of writing inhabits,⁵¹ it is possible to isolate some common themes, characteristics, and interesting intersections that illuminate the early martyr acts.

The main paradigm of the Greek novel is that the passion or desire between a couple (married or unmarried) is tested repeatedly and finally love wins out, the couple is reunited and married, and the social order, which was briefly interrupted, is restored and reaffirmed. The apocryphal acts (whether they precede or follow in each case) show the flipside of this paradigm: A young woman is betrothed or married but

chooses to follow instead an apostle and to devote herself to a continent and religious life, apart from her husband or lover (or with him but living chastely). In these stories, the women do not perform their expected and traditional roles as wife and mother, and the social order is disrupted or destroyed.⁵² Thus the passion or desire has a public function (the more so in Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, where the two lovers are son and daughter of two political rivals), just as desire for martyrdom operates in a civic or public capacity.⁵³

Before we examine the main points of comparison between the Greek novel and the *Passio*, I want to look at examples from the two different kinds of texts (the novel and acts of the apostles or martyr acts) where there seems to be a clear intersection. Heliodorus introduces a female protagonist, Charicleia, who undergoes, in this long and complex tale, one test of her virtue after another. Charicleia and her lover, Theagenes, end up in Egypt in the last part of Heliodorus' *Ethiopica*. In Memphis, Charicleia is wrongly accused of poisoning a servant by Arsace, wife of the Persian satrap, who is jealous of Charicleia and desires Charicleia's lover, Theagenes. Charicleia is sentenced to be burned at the stake, but, despite her brave attempts to comply with the sentence, the flames "flowed around her rather than licking against her; they caused her no harm but drew back wherever she moved toward them, serving merely to encircle her in splendor and present a vision of her standing in radiant beauty in a frame of light, like a bride in a chamber of flame."⁵⁴ Later, in Meroë, Charicleia is nearly sacrificed, along with Theagenes, to the Sun and the Moon, gods of the Ethiopians. The story of Charicleia's seemingly miraculous escape from certain death bears a close resemblance to the story of Thecla, the female heroine in the acts of Paul and Thecla.⁵⁵ Thecla, in her pursuit of the apostle Paul, was saved first from being burned on a pyre by a sudden rainfall. Later, she is again in danger, beset by dangerous beasts. She decides to baptize herself and jumps into a pit of water full of man-eating seals. Miraculously, a bolt of lightning strikes the pit of water and the seals are killed, leaving Thecla unscathed and hidden by a cloud of fire so that her naked body could not be seen. After further assaults by beasts of various kinds, which were also stymied, Thecla was summoned before the governor to explain her miraculous escapes, and she was finally released.⁵⁶

Comparing different elements of these two stories, Andújar maintains that we can perhaps see a borrowing in Heliodorus' novel from the earlier acts of Paul and Thecla.⁵⁷ Not only do we find in both

the tortured female body, which appears in many acts, martyr tales, and Greek novels, but more specifically a similar treatment of the female heroines and of the beauty that lands them in trouble and ultimately saves them. Both Charicleia and Thecla are presented not as erotic figures but as symbols of chastity and purity; this construction of female beauty is common throughout the apocryphal acts and in some martyr acts but not in other Greek novels. The beauty of the two women is conveyed by the reaction of third parties, or onlookers, or storytellers; this distances the reader (especially the male reader) from the body.⁵⁸ As in the *Passio*, the desired body is separated from the eyes of the viewer by the description of other witnesses, and the portrayal of the heroine or martyr as chaste, virginal, or bride of Christ separates her from the fetishized and clearly eroticized women we see in other Greek novels.⁵⁹

Another passage in a Greek novel that seems to link quite directly to the acts and martyr tales is found in Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Cleitophon*. Leucippe is, along the way, taken captive by pirates, who then sell her to a steward, Sosthenes. His master, Thersander, tries to rape Leucippe, who says that she will not be taken by force. She exclaims, "Bring on the instruments of torture: the wheel—here, take my arms and stretch them; the whips—here is my back, lash away; the hot irons—here is my body for burning; bring the axe as well—here is my neck, slice through! Watch a new contest: a single woman competes with all the engines of torture and wins every round."⁶⁰

As Shaw points out, this text was probably written in or close to Perpetua's lifetime, and female resistance to such bodily punishment (or rape in the case of Leucippe) was a common occurrence in martyr tales of this period.⁶¹ The threatened punishment in *Leucippe and Cleitophon* is both rape and bodily torture. Leucippe, claiming virginal status, says:

I am unarmed, alone, a woman. My one weapon is my freedom, which cannot be shredded by lashes, dismembered by sharp blades, or burned away by fire. It is the one thing I shall never part with.⁶²

We see in the *Passio* and in the character of Perpetua the same combination of great female courage in the face of brutal male behavior, sexualized and eroticized portraits of virginal, chaste women, and the voluntary, even eager, acceptance of torture as long as she maintains her freedom. In Perpetua's case, freedom means the ability to depart this

world for the next. Both Leucippe and Perpetua were calling the shots despite their captive status.⁶³

It stands to reason that Perpetua might well have read the popular novel *Leucippe and Cleitophon*, which was published just before her time and was widely circulated.⁶⁴ The use to which the similar heroines were put differs in the novel, where the social order is confirmed, and the martyr tale and the apocryphal acts, where the opposite situation holds true. But clearly the ideas that were circulating in Perpetua's North Africa influenced her own text.

I have examined two specific texts in the Greek novel and roughly contemporary Christian texts. Now I would like to point to several major themes and images that appear prominently in the Greek novel and the *Passio* (and, in connection with the *Passio*, in the apocryphal acts), but often to very different effect. First is the emphasis on chastity, continence, or virginity. In the novel, the hero and heroine struggle to maintain their chastity for their spouse or intended spouse; in the end, the couples are reunited into marital bliss. In the *Passio*, although Perpetua and Felicitas are technically not virgins (they are mothers), they turn toward chastity in order to become martyrs and brides of Christ (see Chapter 2). They are now continent in the service of their devotion to God and not destined to marry or to become part of the traditional social order. Indeed, they are deserting their families in order to join a newly formed Christian family and so are subverting the social order from a Roman point of view.⁶⁵ What in the novel is a temporary disruption becomes in the *Passio* a permanent disavowal of societal norms.

Second, there is what Cooper calls a "complicity of desire" enlisted among male readers of the novel, who would have sympathized with the male protagonist in the novel, with the denouement, and with the renewal of social order.⁶⁶ I would argue that there is a similar complicity of desire in the putative readership of the *Passio*, the Christians addressed in section 1 of the *Passio* who would be expected to identify with Perpetua and her fellow martyrs and to use them as sources of inspiration toward the creation of a new social order. Desire is very much present in both kinds of texts: It works in similar ways but achieves very different ends. The presence of desire also accounts for a strong undercurrent of eroticism, not only in the novel, where we would expect it, but also in the *Passio*, where Perpetua is sometimes described

in sexualized tones (*Passio* 18, 20), just as martyrs often are in other texts.⁶⁷

A third theme that is repeated in the Greek novel and the *Passio* but transmuted in the Christian landscape is the conflict between male characters.⁶⁸ While in the novel there are frequent battles between the two (or more) men for the body of a woman (e.g., *Leucippe and Cleitophon*, *Ephesiaca*, *Chaereas and Callirhoe*), which are eventually resolved when the husband or fiancé wins back his beloved, in the *Passio* this male–male conflict is transferred to men who fight over the soul and future of Perpetua: her father, the prosecuting governor Hilarianus, her fellow martyr and teacher Saturus, church officials, and finally God. Perpetua seems to be in control of her situation much of the time, but throughout the *Passio*, she is in the middle of a tug of war among the many men who rule or try to rule her worlds. She ultimately successfully rejects the role of Roman wife, mother, and daughter and refuses to accommodate the Roman social code, unlike the heroines of the Greek novels.

One final paired theme, perhaps less obvious but present at least as a substratum, is the growing struggle between the center of the empire (Rome) and the outlying provinces such as Carthage. Travel is a major theme in all but one of the Greek novels (Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*), and even in Longus' novel, the two protagonists in their maturity became wealthy people of status (although they choose to remain shepherds), analogous to the regional people of status who governed provincial cities.⁶⁹ In the *Passio*, the figure of the emperor, Septimius Severus, hovers over the narrative, especially since the games at which Perpetua and her fellow martyrs died were in celebration of the emperor's son's birthday. However, the action all takes place in Carthage, and the sentence is pronounced by the provincial governor, Hilarianus. Again, we have here a world that is increasingly cosmopolitan and imperialized yet also a set of individual cities and provinces, each one dependent upon its own set of administrators, structures, and rules.

There are clearly, then, many likenesses among the apocryphal acts, the Greek novel, and the *Passio*. Although it is impossible to know what the exact lines of influence were, the three categories of works, each individualized and arising from different settings and milieus, share a striking number of themes, cultural foci, social circumstances, and expectations of their readers.

The Greco-Roman writer Apuleius was born in Madauros, not far from Carthage, and died sometime after the 160s, not long before Perpetua was born and when he was enjoying a successful career in Carthage. It is possible that Perpetua knew of Apuleius' novel, but we have no real evidence for this. While it is difficult to point to specific resemblances between the two (although attempts have been made; see subsequent discussion), there are general resemblances in at least three categories. First, as in the case of the Greek novels, some of the narrative and thematic devices used in the novel reappear in martyr narratives in forms redirected toward the new Christian message that is being offered: separation from and reuniting with family, recognition scenes, emphasis on chastity, achieving one's goal after a series of misfortunes and difficulties, happy endings.

Second, the issues of (mis)perception, knowledge, delusion, and sensory confusion or clarity occur repeatedly in both Apuleius and martyr narratives, specifically the *Passio*. Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* introduces not only confusion between the narrator (Apuleius) and the main character (Lucius) but also highlights throughout incidents where sensory, cognitive, and mental confusion play an important role.⁷⁰ Among many other episodes of narrative and authorial confusion, we might point to books 2 and 3, where Lucius thinks he has killed three men, who actually turn out to be not men but wineskins, and the occasion in which he finds himself is the Festival of Laughter, where nothing is as it seems. To further complicate this episode, it seems that Lucius' lover, Fotis, has used magic to animate the wineskins, and Lucius has also been affected by darkness and drink (*Met.* 2.31–3.18). Thus there are multiple reasons why and how Lucius might have been deluded and misled.⁷¹ The worlds of reality and appearance are equally confused in many of the martyr narratives, with confusion over bodies turning into other forms (so *Passio* 10, where Perpetua turns into a male), dreams and visions of alternative worlds, and mysterious events leading up to the final moment of clarity and truth when martyrdom is achieved. As with the Greek novels and in the case of Apuleius, the multiple opportunities for confusion are used in the *Passio* to point to the search for a clear vision of truth.

A third element that appears in Apuleius and again in the *Passio* is a focus on Egypt. Apuleius is initiated into the mysteries of Isis and Osiris in book 11 after he regains his human form. The cult of Isis was very popular in the Roman world and a competitor with Christianity, and Perpetua would probably have witnessed festivals in honor of Isis and perhaps read about Apuleius' conversion.⁷² Perpetua's opponent in the arena in section 10 of the *Passio* is "an Egyptian hideous in appearance" (*Aegyptius foedus specie*, 10.6). There are many theories about why she chose an Egyptian here; one is that the Egyptian god Serapis was important to the emperor, Septimius Severus, and an Egyptian would logically be her opponent in the games to honor Septimius' son, Geta.

Warner points out that the choice of an Egyptian for Perpetua's opponent in her dream may well be linked to the rather odd choice of a cow for her actual opponent in the arena. The Egyptian goddess Hathor was embodied as a cow and was parallel to the Roman goddess Ceres, whose priestesses' robes the Roman guards tried to force Perpetua to wear (*Passio* 18.4). So Warner says, "The image sequence—Egyptian (male)—Devil—mad cow—takes up mythic *topoi* current in pagan belief at the time";⁷³ these *topoi* appear also in Apuleius.

Peter Dronke suggests that Perpetua must have read Apuleius' novel, the *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass*, on the basis of certain, specific words that appear in both texts (all of these words are only in book 10 of the *Metamorphoses*). Dronke points specifically to the phrases *dies . . . muneri destinatus* (*Met.* 10.29; cf. *Passio* 7.9, where *dies* and *munus* are used), the day on which the woman had been "condemned to the beasts" (*bestiis esse damnatam*, *Met.* 10.34; cf. *ad bestias damnatam esse*, *Passio* 10.5); also rare words such as *flexuosus* (winding, *Met.* 10.29; cf. *Passio* 10.3) and *attonitus* (in keen anticipation, *Met.* 10.35; cf. *Passio* 10.5). These are, Dronke says, perhaps "memories of a book that Perpetua had firmly left behind."⁷⁴ Others are dubious that Perpetua's words and phrases are truly borrowings from or echoes of Apuleius; so Bradley says, "it is plausible, if not attractive, to believe that Perpetua had read the *Metamorphoses*."⁷⁵ Thus, while we cannot accept that Perpetua borrowed specific words and phrases from Apuleius, it is possible that she knew of or

had read his work and could have been influenced broadly by his narrative style, themes, focus on Egyptian religion, and accounts of dreams.⁷⁶

Why Do Influence and Genre Matter?

Pervo describes the arc of early Christian fiction as follows: “Narrative ‘fiction’ . . . treating Christian subjects and serving religious ends, begins with the formation of stories about Jesus into a coherent narrative plot, continues with the composition of works featuring apostles and issues in stories about holy men and women, a genre that has arguably never died.”⁷⁷ However we decide to date the various categories of works that developed under Christian influence and however we try to determine the generic boundaries of these works, we may agree that the origin for most texts lies somewhere in classical literature and history, proceeds to the New Testament, and on to the apocryphal acts and the Acts of the Martyrs, with the Greek novel somehow providing additional context for these works.

To complicate this compounding of influence and genre further, there appears probably in the third century the anomalous Christian novel, the *Clementine Recognitions* or *Pseudo-Clementines*.⁷⁸ This novel seems to have arisen from the popular tradition of the Greek and Roman novels, incorporating their themes of travel, dreaming, recognition, rediscovery of lost loved ones, and sexual advances, but transmuting these into the story of Clement, the future bishop of Rome and saint. While the *Clementine Recognitions* may be called the first real Christian novel, it seems, however, to be closely related to pagan works.⁷⁹ Although the Christian novel form did not last, perhaps because it was supplanted by the martyr tales, it nevertheless bears strong witness to the porous boundaries between the Christian and pagan worlds.

Early Christian texts are thus founded on a paradox: They arise out of and are clearly indebted to the very pagan tradition that they were trying to subvert. The shards of classical Greek and Roman texts and literature are, one can argue, the building blocks of the later Christian texts that we have examined here, including the *Passio*. One cannot be understood without an understanding of the other.⁸⁰ When Tomas Hägg

wants to discuss the apostles, martyrs, and saints, he calls them “The New Heroes,”⁸¹ thus relying on a classical construct to explain Christian characters. In order to fully understand the plots, genres, or generic parameters, characters, themes, language, and purposes of Christian writings, it is essential to recognize and put in place the classical cultural background that is being appropriated. Without the latter, we are left with only half of the palimpsest.

Carthage

Pagan Culture, Religion, and Society in the High Roman Empire^{1,2}

Roman Carthage

The Romanization of Carthage and the surrounding area of Africa took place over centuries but was neither a clear-cut nor a steadily forward-moving process. It was a process and an identity that was constantly being negotiated.³ Those who lived in Roman Carthage or North Africa likely inhabited a hybridized identity—they were perhaps descended from a local ethnic-racial group but were likely also thoroughly Romanized long before Perpetua, speaking Latin, wearing Roman clothes, worshipping deities with hybrid names, serving in public offices. Among the Roman Carthaginians, there would have been a multiplicity of different ways of responding to this very mixed culture.⁴

By the third century CE, the time of Perpetua, the intermixing of the indigenous Libyan culture, the Punic culture, and the overlay of Roman, Greek, and eastern cultures was so complete that it was difficult to define what tradition a man or woman or ritual or literary text arose from. The figure of Perpetua's near contemporary and fellow African, Apuleius, neatly embodies the cultural fusion that had taken place.⁵ Mattiacci says of Apuleius: "this brilliant Latin sophist, who shows a specific interest in language as a factor of cultural identity . . . occupies a key position in the study of linguistic relations between the center and the periphery of the empire."⁶ With the growth of Carthage (and other centers of urban

culture), it became increasingly difficult to see where the center was and where the periphery.

The rise of Carthage was far from linear. Carthage, which was probably founded in the ninth century BCE along with many other Phoenician trading ports and colonies, gradually attained an important position among other cities founded by the Phoenicians, sent out colonies herself, and extended Punic influence over the native Libyan or Berber peoples who were indigenous to the area.⁷ Carthaginian and Roman interest in Sicily eventually resulted in those two powers coming into conflict starting in the third century BCE.

Rome and Carthage, fierce enemies over several centuries, faced off in three Punic Wars (so-called), beginning in 246 BCE and ending finally and definitively in 146 BCE with the third war. After a three-year siege, the Romans finally ruled Carthage. The great Roman commander Scipio Africanus razed and consecrated the city.⁸ The Romans rewarded the seven cities who had been their allies (such as Utica) with the status of *civitates liberae et immunes* (free and independent cities), but punished the four cities which had supported Carthage in opposing Rome.⁹ Rome disposed of much of the land, keeping little for herself; Rome was less interested in Carthage for its land than as a political rival.¹⁰

The first colony sent out after 146 BCE was the Colonia Junonia, founded by Gaius Gracchus in 122 BCE.¹¹ Although the Senate canceled the charter of this colony shortly thereafter at Gracchus' death in 121 BCE, the colonists were eventually allowed to keep their allotments of land under the Lex Agraria of 111 BCE.¹² The reoccupation of Carthage itself and the first colony to be sent to Africa and remain was under Julius Caesar, probably in 44 BCE, just after the civil wars and the defeat of the Pompeian forces at Thapsus. Although Augustus had a hand in developing this new colony, it seems clear that Julius Caesar founded it and left instructions for its founding before his death.¹³ Caesar had also annexed Juba's kingdom of Numidia and created the new province of Africa Nova. Augustus reinforced the new colony, adding veterans. The evidence of non-Roman religious cults shows the presence of many native Punic people among inhabitants of the new colony. In 28 BCE, the colony was allowed to have an autonomous government under its own leaders (*sufetes*) and to have its own coinage, and it became again a thriving commercial capital.¹⁴

Augustus formed the province of Africa Proconsularis out of two existing provinces in the 30s BCE, and Carthage became the administrative

center of this province and the place where the provincial governor was located. In time, Carthage would be the third largest city in the Roman empire, according to Augustus' plan. The city was notable in its scope and grandeur, built atop the original Carthage but larger and more impressive (see the next section for the architectural and topographical features of the city). The province of Africa was wealthy, producing a large amount of the empire's grain. Carthage herself commanded a good harbor and was at the confluence of two rivers and roads built by the Romans so she was in a position to be a great commercial center.

By the second century CE, Carthage was the largest and wealthiest city in the western part of the empire after Rome. The Byrsa, the center of the city, was expanded, and new and large buildings arose: a basilica, circus, and baths.¹⁵ Carthage also offered a vibrant intellectual and social life, as is attested by the writer Apuleius. He left to study in Greece but returned to live and give speeches in Carthage. Apuleius said of Carthage: "But what greater or more certain praise is there than to speak well of Carthage, where all your citizens are most erudite and among whom boys study learning in all its forms, adults show it off, and old men teach it? Carthage, the respected teacher of our province; Carthage, the heavenly Muse of Africa; Carthage, the inspiration of those who wear the toga."¹⁶

Under Emperor Septimius Severus, in whose reign Perpetua died, there is an increase in the foundation of *municipia*, *coloniae*, and *civitates*. It seems that the emperor, whose family came from Lepcis Magna, favored his native land and also spent time there in his travels around the empire.¹⁷ Inscriptions from this period indicate that most of the indigenous peoples maintained their own language and cults, and the Punic language continued to be the language spoken by many, particularly the lower classes.¹⁸

The City of Carthage

By the time the Romans conquered and razed Carthage in 146 BCE, the city had lasted and prospered for about 700 years. When the city was rebuilt and colonized by the Romans under Julius Caesar and Augustus, it was almost certainly rebuilt on the original site.¹⁹

The center of the new city was the Byrsa, a high fortress of ancient Carthage. The Romans leveled the top of the Byrsa, erected large

columns on the slopes of the hill over the ruins of Punic houses in order to enlarge the surface area they needed for building, and built a large new forum on top that encompassed some 98,000 square feet.²⁰ The forum, which occupied the northern part of this area, was laid out in traditional Roman grid style with two main roads, the *cardo maximus* and the *decumanus maximus*, and subsidiary roads running parallel to them. During Augustus' reign, several major public buildings were erected in the Byrsa, including probably a basilica and a temple at ends of the forum.

Carthage grew slowly at first, coming once again into prosperity by the second century CE.²¹ What might it have looked like in Perpetua's time?²² Under the emperors Hadrian (117–138 CE), Antoninus Pius (138–161 CE), and Marcus Aurelius (161–180 CE), more building took place on a grand scale after a large fire and spread beyond the Byrsa (which continued, however, to be the center of the city).²³ A large basilica was erected where a smaller, older one had stood, and another structure that may be the library mentioned by Apuleius in his *Florida* (18.8–9). The circus on the western edge of the city, where chariot races could be seen, was one of the largest in the Roman empire, nearly as big as the Circus Maximus in Rome. The huge Antonine Baths, built in the mid-second century CE and second in size only to the baths of Nero in Rome, stood near the sea to the south of the Byrsa. These baths included *palaestrae* (exercise areas), pools, hot and cold rooms, and places to gather and read. The public latrines were so large that, when they were later excavated, they were mistaken for a theater. On the northwest was built the famous amphitheater, second in size to the Roman Colosseum; it was in this amphitheater in Carthage that Perpetua was likely martyred.²⁴ Opposite the circus on the eastern side of the city were two theaters, one an *odeon* or covered theater built in the early third century CE.²⁵

The history, dimensions, and layout of the amphitheater in Carthage, of which very little survives, can be deduced from several sources: comparable amphitheaters in Africa and Italy, textual sources, and inscriptions.²⁶ According to this evidence, the amphitheater must have been begun in the first century CE and completed before the middle of the second century CE. Reconstruction and renovation took place just after 165 CE. The amphitheater was very large with perhaps as many as fifty–sixty arches and six ranges of arcades (an extraordinary height); by comparison the Roman Colosseum had eighty arches. It could seat as many as 30,000 spectators. The building materials were locally sourced,

but the building was ornate and used Romano-Campanian architectural practices.²⁷

Although we have many ancient references to the size, grandeur, and importance of Carthage, there is little left of its buildings, and it is difficult to know exactly what buildings existed or what they looked like. Apuleius' praise of the city will have to suffice to tell us what a vibrant and important city Carthage was by the second–third centuries CE.

One other feature of the city of Carthage deserves mention: the tophet.²⁸ Such outdoor sacrificial areas existed in many cities. The tophet of Carthage was at the western edge of the harbor. It has been the center of a great deal of controversy because the urns found there contain the remains of many young children (as well as of animals). Due to the fact that we have very little clear evidence²⁹ and that the whole topic of child sacrifice in North Africa has produced sharply divergent opinions, it is difficult to come to any definite conclusions about who (or what) was buried in these urns and why or how they died. The archaeological evidence reveals that many young children, some very young infants and some as old as two to four years, were buried in the tophet along with sacrificial animals. This is beyond dispute. But what is not clear, and may never be clear, is whether the children died young of natural causes and were then buried or were sacrificed to a god (Baal Hammon) in order to win favor in times of crisis.³⁰

There are many problems to explain. One odd and surprising fact that has emerged and has puzzled scholars is that in the votive deposits studied from the seventh century BCE, the ratio of the remains of sacrificed young animals to the remains of children is about one out of three. But in the remains found from the fourth century BCE, the ratio of animals to children is about one out of ten. Thus the proportion of “substitute sacrifices” (animals) is lower in the earlier finds than in the later finds. This is the opposite of what we might expect: that there would be a chronological devolution from a “‘barbarous’ ritual practice of human sacrifice to a gentler ‘civilized’ version of the ritual, the sacrifice of a substitute victim.”³¹ Rather, the later burials show more remains of children and a reduction of substitute sacrifices.³²

For those who argue for the practice of child sacrifice among the Carthaginians, there are two uncomfortable facts that must be considered. First, no one of the major Greek or Roman historians mentions that the Carthaginians engaged in this practice, a practice that

any Roman source would surely have made much of in order to impugn their ancient enemy. Second, the infant mortality rate, especially among the very young children, was high, and thus it is quite possible that the children found in the tophet had died of natural causes and were not sacrificed.³³

The debate about those lying in urns in the tophet continues, and trying to reconcile the literary and archaeological evidence remains an impossible task.³⁴

The Emperor Septimius Severus and his Family

In a biography of Septimius Severus (written first in 1971 and then published in a revised edition in 1988 and in paperback in 1999), the author, Anthony Birley, says that he has changed the original title, *Septimius Severus: The African Emperor*, to a new title, *The African Emperor: Septimius Severus*. This change affirms his view that “there was something specifically African about this man.”³⁵ Birley further claims in his 1988 preface that his emphasis on Septimius’ African nature “may be unwelcome.”³⁶ Anglo-Saxons, he claims, “may not always grasp the complexity of a society in which there were two languages of culture, Latin and Greek, and a variety of other tongues in common use.”³⁷ Thus Birley makes a case for us to read Septimius Severus as somehow fundamentally different in his African birth and culture, and he emphasizes the social, cultural, and linguistic complexities of the African land that produced him.³⁸

Septimius Severus was from Lepcis Magna, on the coast of North Africa in the area of Tripolitania (modern Libya).³⁹ The Septimii of Lepcis Magna go back many generations, at least to a Roman knight (Septimius) of Punic origin, who went to Italy as a child at the end of the first century CE.⁴⁰ His son, an equestrian, born in Lepcis but raised at the family’s estate in Italy, was probably Septimius Severus’ grandfather. When Lepcis became a Roman colony under Emperor Trajan, this Septimius Severus was one of the last to hold the highest Punic magistracy (*sufes*), and he was also one of the first two *duoviri* (chief magistrates) of the new Roman colony.

Septimius Severus was born in 145 CE during the reign of Antoninus Pius. Descended from a line of Septimii, he was named Lucius Septimius Severus. His father was undistinguished and held no office, but two

great-uncles had been consulars and two uncles were in the senate by the time he was born. One of these was able to procure senatorial rank for Septimius Severus. We are told that he was educated in Lepcis until 163 or 164 and then went to Rome for further study.⁴¹

Septimius Severus rose through the ranks, holding various governmental positions in Sardinia, Spain, and Africa under Marcus Aurelius, then, under Commodus, the son of Marcus Aurelius, he commanded a legion in Syria. Following a period of study in Athens, he was made governor of Gaul. During this period (ca. 186–188 CE), he married his second wife, Julia Domna. Septimius Severus continued his rise, holding the positions of proconsul of Sicily, consul suffectus (interim consul) in 190, and finally governor of Pannonia in 191 through the good offices of a fellow African who was praetorian prefect. There he capably managed a troubled region and gained a reputation with the troops there that helped him to become emperor.

After the murders of two short-lived emperors (Pertinax and Didius Severus Julianus), Septimius Severus entered Rome, was recognized by the senate, and without opposition became emperor in June 193.⁴²

Thus the emperor during most of Perpetua's lifetime and her early death was born of an African father and Italian mother, grew up in a Punic-speaking area but then studied in Rome, joined the *cursus honorum* thanks to senators in his family, and rose fairly quickly to become the first African emperor due to his family connections and his own intelligence, skill, and popularity with the army, and also to the unpopularity of two short-lived emperors who were murdered in 193, clearing the way for Septimius Severus.

And what of his wives? His first wife, Paccia Marciana, was also from Lepcis Magna and from an indigenous family there. She died in the 180s after ten years of marriage to Septimius Severus, and he then took a second, more famous wife, Julia Domna, the future mother of his two sons, Caracalla and Geta. She was from Emesa (Syria), and Septimius Severus must have met her relatives while he served as legate in Syria. An anecdote from the *Historia Augusta* tells us that Septimius Severus, who put much stock in astrology, received the news that a woman in Syria (Julia Domna) was told by *her* astrologer that she would marry a king. This prediction would be, of course, advantageous for both of them. And so it happened, as the story goes, that Septimius Severus solicited Julia's hand in marriage (long distance), and his proposal was accepted. Septimius Severus was some twenty-five–thirty years older

than his bride. They were probably married in 187, with two male heirs soon to follow, in 188 (Caracalla) and 189 (Geta).

Julia Domna, a Greek-speaking and Greek-educated woman, was from an entirely different part of the empire than Septimius Severus, but both probably spoke Greek and Latin, both were upper class, and both were ambitious.⁴³ As Septimius Severus traveled to various posts before he became emperor, Julia went with him then and also after he acceded to imperial power. After he was declared emperor in 193, Julia was awarded the title *Mater Castrorum* (Mother of the Camps) in 195, and her statue appeared in places around the empire, including in military camps.⁴⁴ In 198–200, Septimius Severus and Julia were in Syria, then Egypt. By then, Septimius Severus held absolute power (having beaten back several rivals), and Julia was his powerful consort, looked to by many as a liaison to the emperor. In 202, the family returned to Rome, with Caracalla by his father's side as future emperor and heir.

Later in 202 or early 203, the imperial family set off for Septimius Severus' native land, Lepcis Magna.⁴⁵ This would be Julia's first visit to Lepcis. Septimius Severus inaugurated a building program there, erecting at the center the Arch of Severus and a forum with colonnades, a temple, and a basilica.⁴⁶ The family returned to Rome in 203 and thus may have been in Africa when Perpetua was martyred, but it is very doubtful that Septimius Severus would have taken notice of this event.⁴⁷

Much fanfare greeted the family upon their return to Rome. A new Arch of Severus and Caracalla was built, lavish games were offered, and the Secular Games (held in theory every 100 years) were celebrated in 204.⁴⁸ In these Julia Domna and other women played a major ceremonial role. Septimius Severus, who spent little time in Rome over his time as emperor, left for Britain in 207 or 208, accompanied as always by Julia. Geta and Caracalla had by then acquired the title Augustus, and Julia Domna the title *Mater Augustorum*. Julia and her son Geta took up residence in Eboracum (York), remaining there until Septimius Severus, who had been in poor health, died in 211 at about age 65. Julia and her sons left for Rome, with Julia justifiably apprehensive about the transfer of power to her sons and about Caracalla's plans and ambitions.

Although Julia tried her best to create peace between her two sons, it was quite clear who held the upper hand: the older son, Caracalla. In December of 211, the year of Septimius Severus' death, Geta was murdered in the arms of his mother to whom he had run for protection.⁴⁹ Julia was

forced to profess loyalty to and support for Caracalla in order to maintain stability in the empire and to ensure her own survival. After Geta's death, Caracalla departed, first to Germany, then to the east with Julia along for at least material support.⁵⁰ In 217, Caracalla was assassinated between Edessa and Carrhae after only six years in power, while Julia was in Antioch. Caracalla was succeeded by Macrinus and then, a year later, by Elagabalus, the great-nephew of Julia Domna and grandson of her sister, Julia Maesa. Julia Domna committed suicide after Macrinus became emperor, realizing that she would lose her power, her titles, and probably her ability to move freely.⁵¹

The two sons of Septimius Severus and Julia Domna, born less than a year apart, were meant to be co-rulers, but, as so often happens, that plan did not end well. Lucius Septimius Bassianus (nicknamed Caracalla for the hooded cloak he wore) had his name changed at about age ten to Marcus Aurelius Antoninus in order to cement the fiction that Septimius Severus had been adopted by Marcus Aurelius and was continuing the Antonine dynasty through his sons.⁵² Stories abound about the two brothers (often unreliable), including the idea that Julia favored Geta, because he was her real son, over Caracalla, because he was her stepson. This has no credence, but such a story might have both explained Julia's fondness for Geta (who was killed in her embrace) and added some years onto Caracalla's birth, making him more senior to his younger brother than just a year and therefore more deserving to be sole ruler.⁵³

When Septimius Severus died at York on February 4, 211, and Julia Domna and her two sons went to Rome, the sons were recognized by the senate as joint rulers. Julia, who saw the writing on the wall, tried every means to reconcile her sons, but she failed utterly. In December 211, only months after Septimius Severus' death, Geta was slain by Caracalla's men and declared a public enemy. Geta suffered *damnatio memoriae*, with all his portraits, statues, and inscriptions mentioning him destroyed and defaced.⁵⁴

Geta is a figure in our story of Perpetua because her death in the Carthaginian amphitheater occurs on the occasion of the celebration of Geta's fourteenth birthday on March 7, 203 CE. At this time, Geta and his family were apparently on a visit to Africa (see previous discussion).

Some knowledge about the emperor, his family, and their background allows us to understand more fully the North African and

Roman cultures in which Perpetua lived, was educated, and died. Just as fascinating are the multicultural worlds in which Septimius Severus and Julia Domna lived. What languages did they speak? How well educated were they? What ethnic groups did they favor? Is it possible to determine answers to these questions when our sources set Septimius Severus and Julia Domna in a largely Greco-Roman mold?

Here is what we are told, mostly by Cassius Dio and the *Historia Augusta*. Septimius Severus spoke fluent Punic, but he was also said to have studied Greek and Latin, both the languages and also oratory and philosophy.⁵⁵ The *Historia Augusta* tells us that he was “adequately trained in Latin literature, a polished speaker of Greek, more fluent in Punic eloquence.”⁵⁶ But, despite his education in three languages, he was said to have retained an African accent for his entire life.⁵⁷ His sister, Octavilla, could not speak Latin well at all, according to our sources;⁵⁸ perhaps she was married to a Greek speaker and used to speaking Punic herself.

Julia Domna herself was a woman of culture and learning. She was tasked by her son Caracalla, when he became emperor and departed for the East, with receiving petitions and taking charge of the official correspondence in both Latin and Greek.⁵⁹ She is said to have taken refuge in philosophy when the praetorian prefect Plautianus was in the ascendancy and attacked Julia, his rival for power. There is talk of a circle of scholars and philosophers around Julia, which included the eminent Philostratus, who perhaps wrote a life of Apollonius of Tyana at Julia’s behest.⁶⁰ She is counted as one of the imperial patrons along with important women like Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, Plotina, wife of Trajan, and Faustina Maior and Minor, wives of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius.⁶¹ Thus Julia Domna was a well-educated woman, a Roman citizen but coming from the far reaches of the empire, who took a prominent role in the cultural life of the Severan court and in the lives of her husband and son, Caracalla. What such a woman might have thought of Christianity or of a young Roman and African martyr like Perpetua, we cannot know.⁶²

Pagan Life in Carthage in Perpetua’s Time

Perpetua lived in an early time of Christianity’s appearance in Carthage. What would the city have looked like in the late second–early third

centuries CE? What social, religious, and intellectual forces would have shaped Perpetua's choices in the city in which she lived?⁶³ How would Christianity have differed from the many forms of nonmonotheistic cults and practices that most Carthaginians and North Africans participated in?⁶⁴

We will look more closely in the next chapter at Christian life in Carthage, but it is important to note now that the first explicit mention of any Christians in Carthage was in 180 CE, when the trial of a group called the Scillitan martyrs was held before the proconsul Vigellius Saturninus.⁶⁵ Although we have no direct mention of Christians in Africa before this, the seeds of Christianity must have been planted well before this event in order for such a group to have been attracted to the new religion, converted, and brought to trial. Further, the fact that these Christians were from a rural town indicates that the religion had spread from city to countryside. And the names of some of the Christians were native African names so these people were not transplants from Italy.⁶⁶ Thus we can believe that Christianity had taken root and begun to spread considerably before the Scillitan trial in 180.

Therefore it seems that Perpetua had around her by her teens a ready, if small, community of Christians.⁶⁷ But that was still a small segment of her city. Most of the inhabitants of Carthage would probably have worshipped at the city's temples and shrines or practiced individual rituals that were not tied to any larger group. We know of many gods worshipped in Carthage, some local Punic gods who were blended with similar Roman deities and given Roman names, some imported from other countries like Egypt (e.g., Serapis).⁶⁸

Two major local gods were Tanit, also called Juno Caelestis, and Saturn, a pre-Roman god who was sometimes associated with the Punic Baal Hammon.⁶⁹ Rives discusses in details the workings of private religion and public cults and the complex synergistic relationships between imported Italian (and Greek) gods and native African gods whose identities blended in sometimes extraordinary ways.⁷⁰ Two examples of such eclectic and puzzling religious dedications or shrines will demonstrate the complex cultural and personal approaches to deities in and around Carthage. In one dedication, a woman named Valeria Stacte devotes a gift to Diana Caelestis Augusta.⁷¹ This dedication is odd in several ways. Diana was not commonly worshipped in Africa, and the name Caelestis was more often applied to the major goddess of Carthage (or Juno). Perhaps Caelestis in this instance was used in its

descriptive meaning, “heavenly,” and not with its usual reference to the great goddess. Perhaps Valeria Stacte had in mind the Virgo Caelestis found in Tertullian and Augustine in reference to the Carthaginian goddess and in a dedication by an African army officer in Britain.⁷² Stacte is a Greek name, and thus Valeria Stacte may have been speaking out of a Latino-Greco-Punic tradition.

The god Saturn, who figures in Perpetua’s narrative when the organizers of the games try in vain to force Perpetua’s male martyr companions to dress in the robes of the priests of Saturn (*Passio* 18.4), was a powerful god brought to Carthage by the Romans.⁷³ Perpetua and her fellow martyrs refused to be presented as pagan deities (the women were to be dressed as priestesses of Ceres).⁷⁴ But Saturn held a powerful place in Carthaginian cult and religion, and he was widely worshipped, both as a Roman deity and as a Punic god. A votive stele from Carthage tells an interesting story (and this is our second example of an eclectic dedication in Carthage).⁷⁵ The inscription on the stele is partly in the Latin alphabet (the four capitalized letters), but the rest is in neo-Punic: “to the Lord Bāal, the vow which CREScens made; he heard his voice, he made (him) prosperous.” As Rives says, this inscription shows not only continuity “but actual identity with the Punic cult.”⁷⁶ The tophet was the site of worship of the ancient Punic god Baal, and the later inhabitants, transplanted from Italy, would have known this. Thus we have the syncretism of old and new, Punic and Roman deities, Baal and Saturn.

There were clearly many different pagan deities worshipped in Carthage, some by private individuals and some in public cults, and there is no one way in which the Roman gods and the native gods interacted or were viewed by their adherents. Most of these cults had not been in continuous existence since early Punic times but had disappeared and reappeared in different forms after Roman colonization. As the Roman settler elite became more imbued with African culture and religion, they began to adopt some of the older Punic gods as their own, melding names and attributes. At the same time, more native Africans were becoming a part of the governing elite of Carthage, bringing with them their own religious traditions.⁷⁷ By sometime in about the second century CE, Carthage and her surrounding towns and cities were becoming a true blend of Roman and African cultures, although it is not easy to tell exactly when this process began or how long it took before the Roman and Italian settlers in Africa began to be interested in local and native deities and cults.

Thus the Christians in Carthage were surrounded by temples and shrines to many different gods, by public cults and their observances, and by private worship of gods practiced by individuals. Tertullian is one of our most observant contemporary sources for the details of religious life in Carthage and, although clearly biased, gives us valuable information about how the Christians might have operated in the second–early third centuries and how they might have viewed their social and cultural spaces and been viewed by the non-Christians, who far outnumbered them.

When the city celebrated the successes of Septimius Severus in 197, the Christians and Jews would not participate in the festivities because they involved the worship of idols and licentious behavior.⁷⁸ The Christians and Jews must have separated themselves from the pagan population in a number of ways, some more and some less obvious. They buried their dead in separate cemeteries; they gathered to worship in exclusive groups in their own places of worship; they declined to participate in public ceremonies and civic observances that would have required them to act in a manner contrary to their beliefs.⁷⁹ Although the Christians themselves were highly aware of differences among them, it is unlikely that pagans understood these differences. As Rives points out, the exclusivity of all the Christian groups was probably seen as their most salient and single-defining characteristic by non-Christians.⁸⁰

The people of Carthage had a wide range of religious options at their disposal and often participated in worshipping more than one deity.⁸¹ Neither the imperial government (which was far removed) nor the local councils stood very often in the way of the choice of worship, whether it was public cult or private observance of the many gods who were worshipped in Africa.⁸² As long as a religious group did not interfere with the social or political stability of its city, town, or province, there was little attempt to regulate religious choice.

If this was the case, we must ask why Perpetua made the choices she did (to become a Christian and a martyr) and why the actions of Perpetua and her fellow Christians led to their arrest. What brought them to the attention of those who arrested them? What caused a young woman who was brought up in such a welter of Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Punic, and other gods to narrow her choice to just one god, the only god, for whom she was willing to die? Why did some of her family become Christians but not everyone (especially her father)? Which deities

did her father worship, and why did his choices not become Perpetua's choices? At what point in Perpetua's life did she make the seemingly irrevocable decision to join a group that demanded she devote herself to one god and not to the many gods that most people worshipped? What was her religious life like before she became a Christian?

Some of these questions we simply cannot answer; others we will take up in our discussion of Christians in Carthage in Chapter 5. For the present, it is enough to stress that the teeming and vibrant city of Carthage offered to its inhabitants, both Roman and native, a wide variety of choices in their religious activities. Many would have been involved in public cults, which offered to them a shared sense of community, just as Christian groups did for their members.⁸³ Many people would also have engaged in private religious devotion (Christians combined such private devotion with the solidarity and support of their spiritual group). Most religious groups served as a link between the individual and his or her community, and thus religion was regarded by the Romans as one aspect of civic life, inseparable from other aspects of it.⁸⁴ As Rives states, "people understood their civic identities as members of the Roman empire in terms of their own religious identities."⁸⁵ Christians may have tried to make the case that they too performed as bona fide Roman citizens while worshipping as Christians, but their fellow citizens—pagans—and the local and imperial magistrates did not always see it that way.

One other aspect of the pagan influence on Christians in Carthage deserves to be mentioned. We have mostly discussed the social and political aspects of religious life in Carthage for pagans and Christians, but intellectual life and influences were just as important. As we've seen in Chapter 3, Perpetua's text was both influenced by and an influence on other writers contemporary with her, some of whom were her fellow Africans. Apuleius was a major figure who was her near contemporary (dying about ten years before she was born). Tertullian, Perpetua's contemporary Christian writer and fellow African, draws heavily from pagan Greek and Roman writers, citing or alluding to, among others, Pindar, Varro, Nepos, Diodorus Siculus, Vergil, Pliny the Elder, and Tacitus.⁸⁶ Many of the Greek novels were written at about the same time as the *Passio*, and there are similarities between Perpetua's text and some of the novels (see Chapter 3).

The Christians, then, did not avoid the use of Greek and Roman pagan texts. Many, including Perpetua, were well educated, and their

education must have included the great Greek and Roman writers. Their intellects, imaginations and symbols were steeped in the world that they had abandoned in their daily, spiritual lives. How did they reconcile those two parts of their lives? Peter Brown asks the question, “how much of the old world had lived on in the new?”; he was speaking about elites in late antiquity several centuries after Perpetua, but the same question could be asked even in Perpetua’s time.⁸⁷

Though the Christians clearly felt themselves a part of this largely pagan, Greco-Roman-based society and made frequent use of this heritage in their intellectual life, the non-Christians in Carthage and elsewhere in the empire often regarded the Christians as outsiders and attacked them for their beliefs and behavior. As evidence of the occasional fury of pagan mobs and onlookers, we need only think of the killing of the group of martyrs in Lugdunum (Lyons) and Vienne in 177 CE and the behavior of those who attended the games in Carthage in 203 at which Perpetua and her companions were martyred (*Passio* 17; 18.2, 9; 20.7; 21.2,7). It is clear that even from the early days of Christianity, when the Christians were but a small fraction of the population of Carthage and the empire, their refusal to accommodate Roman social and religious mores and their insistence on keeping themselves apart from their fellow citizens led to hostility directed at them not only by the local magistrates but also by other citizens who were not themselves Christians.

5

Carthage

The Early Christian Community

Considerations in Understanding Christianity

The considerations that I raise in this section are embedded throughout my discussions in Chapter 4 and this chapter, but they are important enough to be highlighted at the outset. Many of these issues are methodological: They concern how we understand religion and Christianity, and they arise in the context of contemporary ways of approaching ancient religion, which differ markedly from older approaches or approaches tied to one particular discipline or point of view.¹

First, when we discuss religion, we need to be careful to understand and to articulate what we mean by this fraught concept and not to ascribe a mistaken contemporary definition of it to ancient societies. Can such a capacious and loaded term be useful in interrogating ancient, indigenous worship systems that are not parallel to what we might mean by “religion” today (and today each person using the term might mean something quite different)? Should we use this conceptual category as a lens through which to understand certain kinds of social practices and phenomena, and can we do that without imbuing it with our own cultural and personal biases?² It seems to me that we can use the term religion and examine ancient religion in the Roman empire if we use caution in our approach, maintain an awareness of how our own biases might influence our views on how ancient religion operated, and understand

religion as something that was rooted in particular historical conditions and that continually developed and changed over time.³

Second, it is clear that religion cannot be treated in isolation and as a separate category. Scholars who study religion can be, for example, theologians but also historians, anthropologists, literary critics or theorists, sociologists, or political theorists.⁴ Later in this chapter, I mention the work of Rodney Stark, a sociologist who employs contemporary studies of religious movements to try to understand why so many people converted to Christianity and in such a short period of time. The study of Christianity can best be done when it is viewed in the light of social, economic, historical, material, or other cultural forces that intersect with and explain the many facets of religious experience.⁵ Religion in the Roman empire was but one element of civic organization and life; the implications of this for an individual's interactions with his or her social matrix are vast.⁶

Third, Christianity cannot be seen as separate from Roman history in all its aspects, including the history and sociology of Roman provincial life. How can we understand a woman like Perpetua unless we know something about life in a city like Carthage, the mores and expectations of a Roman family of good standing in a provincial capital, the social circumstances of an early Christian, the duties and actions of provincial magistrates, and the education available to women in the second–third centuries CE? The Roman world itself is enormously complex; the evolution of religious systems like Christianity and Judaism increased the complexity as the Roman traditions and the new Christian beliefs intersected and collided. As we have seen, the Christians interwove Roman and Greek ideas into their religious life and beliefs so that many of their ideas would have seemed familiar and reasonable to non-Christians. Christianity and pagan forms of worship and behavior were not as dissimilar or opposed as they have been portrayed to be; Roman, Greek, and pagan ways of thinking and behaving were very much present in Christian behavior.

In addition, both Christianity and pagan forms of worship were marked by an unusual degree of diversity so that it is impossible to set up a neat opposition of x and y (“Christians did x, pagans did y”).⁷ As I discuss later in this chapter, Augustine distinguishes eighty-eight different types of Christianity in his *De haeresibus ad Quodvultdeum*, and Roman religion offered a veritable marketplace of choices to non-Christians (some of which Christians partook of in various ways). As

Rives says, “The religious pluralism, not to say anarchy, of the empire reflected the absence of any organized system of official religion.”⁸

We are thus looking at religious life in the Roman empire through a different lens than did earlier scholars. Because much current work now assigns a great importance to diversity and interdisciplinarity, our ways of approaching Christianity in the Roman empire are at the same time more interesting and more complex. We no longer see pagans, Christians, and Jews as three distinct groups, set apart from each other by their beliefs, practices, and rituals. The boundaries between and among them are seen as blurred, difficult to determine, and often permeated; each group had a plurality of identities within it and borrowed from others with whom they regularly interacted.⁹

To make matters more complicated, it is not possible to isolate Christianity or “Christianness” in any real way in Carthage or any other place where Christians lived.¹⁰ As Rebillard stresses, being Christian was only one part of a person’s identity, one that was activated under certain circumstances but not obvious or present in many of that person’s normal or daily interactions.¹¹ Except for extreme cases such as martyrs like Perpetua, it often would not have been obvious if someone was a Christian, a Jew, or a pagan. In Christian writings from church officials and theologians such as Tertullian and later Augustine, a separate Christian identity was often stressed in order to try to strengthen the easily blurred boundaries, to encourage their followers to exhibit particularly Christian forms of behavior, and to mark off defined moral and ethical standards.¹² Reading such Christian tracts might lead us to subscribe to the Christianness theory, but we must keep in mind the audience that such theologians were addressing and their purposes for writing. Furthermore, the fact that a writer like Tertullian struggled so hard to define the Other (non-Christian) and to urge Christians to uphold their way of life so as to distinguish themselves strongly indicates that many Christians did lead a multiform life, with Christianity being only one part of it.¹³ Tertullian’s message differs from work to work, depending on his audience and the message he was trying to deliver. In the *Apology*, Christians are represented as having multiple identities and adopting many pagan behaviors, whereas in a much differently focused work (but one probably written close in time to the *Apology*), *On Idolatry*, he stresses that Christians must not adopt pagan rituals.¹⁴

Christianity, therefore, is a complex religion that arose in complex circumstances. We should not try to oversimplify it or put it in a category

separate from the cultural matrix that gave birth to it. Nor should we be overly influenced by the authors of Christianity who wrote in one particular genre or from one particular vantage point. But we also must be mindful that Perpetua and her fellow martyrs represented a particular and extreme form of Christianity, one that undoubtedly overshadowed their other identities and became their sole focus. This set them apart from many other Christians.

How to Recognize a Christian

In the anonymous second-century CE *Epistle to Diognetus*, the author remarks on the difficulty of distinguishing a Christian from anyone else:

For Christians are no different from other people in terms of their country, language, or customs. Nowhere do they inhabit cities of their own, use a strange dialect, or live life out of the ordinary. They have not discovered this teaching of theirs through reflection or through the thought of meddlesome people, nor do they set forth any human doctrine, as do some. They inhabit both Greek and barbarian cities, according to the lot assigned to each. And they show forth the character of their own citizenship in a marvelous and admittedly paradoxical way, by following local customs in what they wear and what they eat and in the rest of their lives. They live in their respective countries, but only as resident aliens; they participate in all things as citizens, and they endure all things as foreigners.¹⁵

So there was nothing immediately recognizable about a Christian. Furthermore, not all Christians were alike. Thus MacMullen says, “Of course there are Christians and Christians.”¹⁶ As time went on, there were many different groups of Christians or different ways of being a Christian, so it is difficult even to use “Christian” as a useful defining category (just as with “pagan”; see Chapter 4). Christianity was—and we will discuss this at greater length later—a local religion, as was true for most religions.¹⁷ What or how a group might worship in a town in North Africa might bear little resemblance to what another group, also calling themselves Christians, was doing in their religious observance in Italy,

Gaul, or Phrygia. There was normally little connection between the various groups, at least until a much later time.

We start then with the proposition that Christianity cannot be pinned down to a place, a time, a particular type of person, a culture, or an ethnic group. It could have showed up anywhere,¹⁸ in a small rural enclave or a big city, and might have come to the attention of a local governor or not, depending on a set of circumstances that remains mysterious to us. To complicate matters further, our sources are largely Christian so that we are getting only one side of the developing story. The few non-Christian sources that we do have, for example, Pliny, Suetonius, and Tacitus, differ in their interpretations of Roman imperial reactions to the rise of Christianity so we cannot gain any clarity from those authors. In short, there will be many questions we cannot even begin to answer. But we can try to put together a reasonable picture of the religious, social, and cultural situations that Perpetua might have found herself in and arisen from at the turn of the third century CE and to situate her in her particular time and space in the beginnings of Christianity.

Where did Christianity in Carthage Come from?

One of our earliest African sources for Christianity in the second–third centuries, and a source contemporary with Perpetua, is Tertullian. One might think that he would have mentioned in one of his many writings the foundations and early days of Christianity in Carthage, but Tertullian seems not to know what this history was and never refers to it in explicit terms. Thus we must surmise that Christians had been a presence in Carthage for quite a while before Tertullian's lifetime.¹⁹

There are two main theories about the provenance of Carthaginian Christianity. One is that Carthaginian Christians were an offshoot of or related to the mother church in Rome. Carthage as a major port would have attracted to its shores many traders and visitors, and we could argue that many of these might have come from Rome and elsewhere in Italy given the geographical proximity.²⁰ While Tertullian does compare the Roman and Carthaginian churches in their creed, faith, baptism, eucharist, church discipline, and use of the Old Testament and the New Testament (*Praescr. Haer.* 36), he never states that the church at Carthage came from the Roman church.²¹ But it is notable that Latin

Christianity seems to begin in North Africa with the Scillitan martyrs, Tertullian, and Perpetua.

The second theory, which now seems more broadly accepted, is that Christianity came to Carthage from the eastern part of the Roman empire, where it clearly had strong roots. Paul came from Tarsus in the East (according to the author of the acts), Montanism arose in Phrygia, and one of the earliest documents on Christian martyrdom is a letter written in Greek by Christians in Lugdunum (Lyons) and Vienne in 177 CE to churches they were somehow associated with in Asia and Phrygia.²² Two of the group of twelve martyrs were from Asia Minor: Attalus from Pergamum and Alexander from Phrygia. Thus it seems a reasonable inference that Christianity arose, at least in Rome and Gaul and perhaps in Carthage as well, in the Greek-speaking community. Barnes points out several aspects of the Christian church in Carthage and its adherents that assume knowledge of Greek; among these are the statement in Saturus' vision in the *Passio* that Perpetua conversed with a bishop and a presbyter in Greek (*Passio* 13.4).²³ Additionally Tertullian composed three of his works in Greek.²⁴

A third possibility, less mentioned, is that Christianity arose out of the Jewish community in Carthage. This theory is largely based on what one scholar, Quispel, sees as a similarity between the communities at Carthage and Alexandria. Some of the Jews who came to Carthage as slaves in 66–70 after the Jewish War could have been Christians.²⁵

The truth is that we cannot know where African Christianity came from, and, in fact, the lines of influence are complicated enough that there is likely not one answer but a confluence of influences.²⁶ Christianity could have arrived—and probably did arrive—in Carthage at different times and from different sources. When cultural and religious systems, which are complex in themselves, are amalgamated with the systems of another, indigenous culture, they become in their many transformations and permutations something that is not in its original form or the form indigenous to its new home but a third system with manifold influences too intertwined to be teased apart.²⁷ We only know that by sometime in the late second century CE, there was a Christian community in Carthage, in both smaller towns (e.g., Scilli) and in larger urban communities (where the majority of Christians were likely found in the beginning). If its rise was difficult to explain and unclear, its spread was remarkably rapid, as we shall see.

*How did such a Tiny Religious Sect Become
the Dominant Religion of the Roman World?*

This is a big question and again one with no easy answer. It is partly a matter of numbers, but more a question of explaining why such a rapidly evolving number of people signed on with such fervor to this messianic sect from (probably) the eastern reaches of the empire.

First, let's look at numbers and then at reasons why so many people converted to Christianity. Various scholars have tried to estimate the numbers of early Christians, partly basing their estimates on ancient sources and partly using sociological theories, trying to infer numbers from the process of conversions to other religions where the sources are more reliable.²⁸ Our early sources for numbers of Christians are the Bible (Acts 1:14–15; Acts 4:4; Acts 21:20), but these numbers cannot be taken literally.²⁹

There have been many guesses about the numbers, and these will have to remain educated guesses. Hopkins, in an influential article on “Christian Number and Its Implications,” tries to show that “there were very few Christians in the Roman world, at least until the end of the second century.”³⁰ He speculates (stressing that is all we can do) that we may perhaps say that in 40 CE there were 1,000 Christians in the empire; in 100 CE, 7,400 Christians; in 150 CE, 40,000 Christians; in 200 CE, 210,000 Christians; in 250 CE, 1,100,000 Christians; in 300 CE, 6,000,000 Christians; and in 350 CE (after Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman empire), 32,000,000 Christians. This assumes a growth rate of 3.35% per year.³¹

Hopkins comes to interesting conclusions about what the growth rate indicates and how these early Christians would have been apportioned. The numbers expanded fairly rapidly but remained very small relative to the numbers of the overall population.³² Because their numbers rose fairly rapidly, the Christians thought that they were having success in recruiting new members, but the Romans paid little attention to them because they constituted a small minority. The Christians did not assemble in churches for a long time (at least until the late second–third centuries) but rather in what Hopkins calls “house cult-groups,” which met in private houses and reflected the diversity of the Christians, and also led to their dispersal and lack of cohesion and coordination. It is difficult to know how big such groups would have been; they likely

varied depending partly on the size of the city or town in which they were located.

One other interesting point related to numbers and growth deserves mention although it concerns a later period than Perpetua's. The greatest jump in numbers of Christians in the empire probably came at two points, in the third and fourth centuries. And these periods of growth coincided with the most organized and violent persecutions, those under Decius and Diocletian. These attacks against the Christians may have encouraged more people to convert and have led to growth in the Christian population, but evidence for this is uncertain.³³ We can say that the persecutions of Decius and Valerian in the mid-third century were followed by the *de facto* official recognition of Christianity by Valerian's son and successor, Emperor Gallienus, who rescinded Valerian's measures and accorded to the Christians more freedoms. The growth of Christians in this period could have been a result of the period of toleration of Christianity between the mid-third century and the early fourth century. If the growth of Christians did follow periods of persecutions, we need to ask whether the Christians may have used the persecutions for their own ends, turning their victimization and martyrdoms into a selling point for a growing religion.³⁴

We now want to ask the big question: How did this very tiny group, whose members were marginalized and different from everyone else because of their monotheism and exclusivity, grow so rapidly and not only survive but become the dominant religion in the empire after only three centuries? The answer, of course, depends on whether you are a Christian or a non-Christian. And there is no one answer; many different factors contributed to the eventual rise and growth of Christianity.

We may mention (but ultimately discard) a theory that was proposed by Harnack in 1908 and adopted after that by others including MacMullen.³⁵ Following Eusebius,³⁶ Harnack and MacMullen accept the claim that the rapid rise of Christianity could only have come about through mass conversions and, following Augustine, through miracles.³⁷ MacMullen posits a crowd psychology and says that very large numbers of people must have been involved, not just "single individuals talking to each other . . . in private settings."³⁸

Most scholars today no longer accept that the evidence supports such mass conversions or that the probable rate of growth demanded such conversions. But we may pick up on MacMullen's reference to single individuals evangelizing in private settings and put that together

with Stark's theories of conversion (in a larger, contemporary sociological setting) to posit a more likely explanation for the rapid rise of this new religion. Stark's main thesis is that "conversion to new, deviant religious groups occurs when, other things being equal, people have or develop stronger attachments to members of the group than they have to nonmembers."³⁹ This happens through connections with family members or close friends who are already part of the new religion. Conversion, in Stark's opinion, is not about embracing an ideology but rather "bringing one's religious behavior into alignment with that of one's friends and family members."⁴⁰ Here we might think of Perpetua, whose family members were Christians (except her father) and who was closely connected to members of her group of fellow martyrs (Saturus, her teacher; Felicitas, her servant or possibly her slave). Thus Christianity might well have arisen from networks or associations that existed already.⁴¹ We know that various small groups of Christians met together in houses; we are not certain what networks would have existed across such groups to other groups in the same city (such as Carthage) or in different cities such as the situation described in the letter from Christians in Lyons and Vienne in 177 CE to Christian communities in Asia.⁴² In this group in Gaul, two of the martyrs were from Asia Minor (Pergamum and Phrygia) and the bishop, Potheinos, has a Greek name. There were certainly, then, interconnections among Christians in different cities and parts of the empire, but it is difficult to say how widespread these networks were.⁴³

It needs to be stressed that Roman society offered a large number of choices of religions in which people could choose to participate. In the beginning, at least, Christianity was just one of these. It might have appealed to people for a number of the reasons previously cited. But because Christianity had affinities both with the various pagan religions and with Judaism, the transition from the kinds of religious groups that people had been familiar with before might have been smoother than we imagine. If a potential convert in addition had friends and family who were already members of a Christian house-church group or who were attracted to Christianity and its doctrines, he or she might not have seen this new religion as something alien to his or her experience. The boundaries between what a person had been or had believed and what the new religion offered were not as clearly drawn as once was thought.⁴⁴

That being said, once a person did join a Christian group, the demands of Christianity would have seemed starkly different than those

of any other religion that he or she had known: belief in one and only one god, and refusal to make the customary sacrifices to the Roman gods and on behalf of the emperor. And, the new converts were in danger of being arrested and cruelly punished for their refusal to participate in the traditional forms of worship of the Roman gods and the emperor.⁴⁵ This required a serious investment in their new religion and a full-hearted commitment, perhaps even risking death.

So we must ask not only how someone like Perpetua was attracted to Christianity to begin with—possibly through her family—but what led a young woman of twenty-one or twenty-two years, a nursing mother, to commit her very life to this religion and to become a martyr?

How Early did Christianity Begin and Where did It Begin?

Tertullian dates the first executions of Christian martyrs to the year 180 CE, in a small town called Scilli or Scillium.⁴⁶ We do not know where this town was (theories abound), but it is safe to say that in the earliest days of persecutions, the victims were from rural towns and were probably from the lower, peasant classes.⁴⁷ Tertullian tells us that the presiding proconsul who condemned this group of twelve Christians was Vigellius Saturninus, the first governor of Africa to execute a Christian.⁴⁸ It is this act that Tertullian takes as the foundational event of the Christians in Africa,⁴⁹ even to the number of martyrs at twelve, parallel to the twelve apostles.⁵⁰

Although Tertullian may take this as a foundational event and although this is our first actual evidence for Christians in Africa, it could not have been the first instance of Christianity in action. A community of Christians must have already been in existence in Africa. But for how long and where? As discussed earlier, we cannot pin down the origins of Christianity in Africa. Nor will we be able to find evidence for the earliest Christian activity in Africa. Rives speculates that Christians must have been active at least by 150 CE, if not earlier.⁵¹ A passage in Apuleius, a North African writer from this period, mentions a miller's wife, who "presumed to worship a false and sacrilegious god whom she proclaimed to be the 'only god'";⁵² this woman is almost certainly a Christian. The portrait of her here is anything but sympathetic.

As discussed earlier, the growth of Christianity is estimated to have been rapid, expanding as much as 40% per decade and rising from

perhaps 40,000 in the empire in 150 CE to as many as over a million by 250 CE.⁵³ We would expect that a similar growth might have taken place in Carthage. The greatest period of growth probably took place in the last decades of the third century during and after the martyrdom of Cyprian in 258 CE.⁵⁴

The other important but unanswerable question about the early Christians in Africa is whether Christianity took hold first in rural Africa (for example, Scilli) and then spread to more urban areas or had already taken hold in the larger cities before it spread to the more rural areas.⁵⁵ This geographical and demographic issue also has a bearing on social class. If Christianity started in, for example, Scilli or Scillium, the martyrs there were likely lower-class peasants without much education. By the time of Perpetua's martyrdom, some twenty years later, we meet Christians like Perpetua, who was from a well-to-do family and educated. Thus the question is central to our understanding of who the early martyrs were.

What would a Christian Group Look Like?

Our main source for the activities of second-century Christians and the way in which they were viewed by others is Tertullian, contemporary with Perpetua. We must be careful about relying too heavily on what he says because his depictions differ depending upon his audience (pagan or Christian). He switches his emphasis and focus to suit the audience for whom he is writing. So in the *Apology*, he presents Christians as very similar to other groups, distinct only in their devotion to one God. But in *On Idolatry*, he presents quite a different picture: Christians were polluted by any interaction with pagans and pagan practices.⁵⁶

Tertullian also tends to exaggerate to make a rhetorical point. So when he says that, if all the Christians in Carthage should be executed, the city would lose much of its population (would be "decimated"), we cannot believe this to be true.⁵⁷ Nonetheless we may cautiously take this as evidence that there were a lot of Christians in Carthage at this time (about 212 CE).⁵⁸

With these strictures in mind, let's look at how Tertullian describes Christian life, behavior, and customs. His *Apology* will be our main source; here he tries to explain to non-Christians what Christian life looks like.

We are a body bound together by a shared religious feeling, by unity of discipline, and by the common bond of hope. We meet together as an assembly and congregation so that, offering up prayer to God with united force, we may wrestle with Him in our supplications. This violence God delights in. We pray also for the emperors, for their ministers and for all in authority, for the welfare of the world, for the prevalence of peace, for the delay of the final end. We assemble to read our sacred writings, should any peculiarity of the times make us look to the future or the past. Whatever the case may be, with the sacred words we nourish our faith, we animate our hope, we reaffirm our confidence; and no less by inculcation of God's precepts we reinforce our teaching. Likewise during our gatherings exhortations are made, rebukes and sacred censures are administered. With great gravity is the work of judging carried on among us, as befits those who feel assured that they are in the sight of God; and it is a most notable foretaste of the judgment to come when anyone who has sinned so grievously as to as to be severed from us in prayer, in the congregation and in all sacred intercourse. Those who preside over us are proven elders, obtaining that honor not by purchase but by established character. There is no buying and selling of any sort in the things of God. Though we have our treasure chest, it is not made up of entrance money, as of a religion that has its price. Once a month each person if they wish puts in a small donation; but only if they wish and only if they are able; there is no compulsion, all is voluntary. These gifts are, as it were, the trust funds of piety. For they are not taken and spent on feasts and drinking bouts and eating-houses, but to support the poor and to bury them, to supply the needs of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of the old now confined to the house, and of those who have suffered shipwreck.⁵⁹

There are several interesting aspects of this description of a Christian group. In many ways it might appear to a non-Christian as just another *collegium* or *corpus* (Tertullian's word in *Apol.* 39.1), no different than a pagan group that had assembled to worship another deity or for nonreligious purposes.⁶⁰ They gathered for regular meetings with a common purpose and a common bond, they prayed for the emperors,

they had their own leaders or elders, they collected voluntary offerings. But to a sharp eye, there were clear differences between these Christian groups and pagan *collegia*. The Christians came together to worship their one true God and only that God. They read their sacred books (*coimus ad litterarum divinarum commemorationem*, Tert. *Apol.* 39.3), and they fed their faith on sacred words (*sanctis vocibus*); those who had sinned (*deliquerit*) were banished from the group. The leaders of the group, who were organized into a hierarchy with bishops, presbyters, and deacons,⁶¹ obtained positions of honor not through payment but through good character; nor did members of these *corpora* have to pay dues (offerings were voluntary). Any money they collected was used for the welfare of their fellow humans—the old, the poor, orphaned young, those working in the mines—and not for banquets and lavish parties. They did share common meals (as in *Passio* 17.1) and ritualized ceremonies such as the Eucharist.

So Tertullian tries to explain what Christians do and how they act by likening their assemblages to similar groups familiar to pagans; but he also clearly distinguishes actions and beliefs that can be attributed only to Christians. To add to an outsider's puzzlement, not all Christians believed the same thing. There were many Christianities, with different doctrines and beliefs. Augustine later counted eighty-eight different types of Christians in his listing of all heresies.⁶² Hopkins points out that the term "Christian" is "more a persuasive than an objective category," and that the ancient writers might have called someone Christian who did not consider himself or herself to be a Christian, at least not in the exclusive way that Christian writers used it or not as a primary self-identifier.⁶³ There was a wide spectrum of Christians, some who dabbled in this new religion along with their pagan cults, some casual attenders who were perhaps interested in learning more about this religion but were certainly not committed enough to endure harassment, exclusion, punishment, and even martyrdom.⁶⁴ Christianity was diverse, and its boundaries were permeated in various ways by people with many different motives. The philosopher Celsus, cited by Origen in 248 CE, reveals both his hostility toward Christians and also his difficulty in coming to terms with the many, competing varieties:

Some of the Christians proclaim they have the same god as do the Jews, others insist that there is another god higher than the creator-god and opposed to him. And some Christians teach

that the Son came from this higher god. Still others admit of a third god—those, that is to say, who call themselves gnostics—and still others, though calling themselves Christians, want to live according to the laws of the Jews. Pretty clearly, some put their faith in one god, others in another, but they all walk around in a fog. Christians, it is needless to say, utterly detest each other; they slander each other constantly with the vilest forms of abuse, and cannot come to any sort of agreement in their teaching.⁶⁵

Committed Christians like Perpetua, who were exclusively monotheistic and marked off from their fellow inhabitants by their total focus on their religion and their God, may have been relatively rare.

Where would Christians have met in Perpetua's time? Likely there were no churches yet at that point so the groups assembled in houses (which is where Perpetua was likely arrested and held until she was taken to prison).⁶⁶ Perhaps our earliest evidence for a church building comes in the middle of the third century CE. Excavations from Dura-Europos have revealed a church building devoted just to religious functions; this building was a remodeled house.⁶⁷ The original building was renovated in such a way that a larger meeting room was created by removing walls; this renovation underscores the rapid rise in the number of Christians in this period. There are very few such remains from early Christian times to help us to understand how and where Christians met and worshipped.

One other piece of material evidence alluded to in a textual source is the cemetery where Christians buried their dead. When Tertullian says that, in 202 CE, Carthaginian mobs attacked Christians and violated their tombs, he implies that the Christians did have a separate cemetery by the early third century CE.⁶⁸ Rebillard, however, disputes whether there was any exclusive, reserved space for Christian burial, and he claims that the mobs may simply have been attacking individual Christian graves.⁶⁹

Thus, although material evidence for early Christian gathering places and burial grounds is scanty, it seems clear from our Christian sources that there were particular rituals, ceremonies, and behaviors that Christians shared only among themselves and that distinguished Christians from non-Christians. This raises another much-discussed question: Was Christianity novel and fundamentally different from other religions and cult practices in Carthage? Some scholars argue that

Christianity had distinctive roots and was from early days a religion different from all others,⁷⁰ but many recent critics, stressing the fluidity of what Christianness meant,⁷¹ would argue that Christians functioned in their day-to-day lives much the same way as non-Christians did, that they would not have seemed remarkable to non-Christians, and that Christianness mattered only occasionally in a Christian's day-to-day life.⁷² In fact, both things could be true. Christianity was indeed marked by a number of practices and beliefs that made them distinct from most or all other religions in that time. For example, Christians would not engage in worship of any other than their one God; Christians had to face great demands on them that made their lives difficult or even precarious; the practice of Christianity was integrally tied to close attention to scriptural reading and sacred texts; Christian practice and belief was closely tied to ethical norms; Christian communities had wide-ranging, translocal networks. Thus Christianity can be regarded as something unique and revolutionary, distinct from other religious practices and beliefs.⁷³ But, as we see in *The Epistle to Diognetus* and other ancient texts, Christians could in many ways be considered to behave, act, dress, and talk just like many of their non-Christian countrymen.⁷⁴

As mentioned earlier, Hopkins, in his attempt to determine the number of Christians in the empire in the first four centuries CE, cautions that the task is hard since the term "Christian" is not an objective category.⁷⁵ Religious identity was ambiguous in this period, and people would not have used this as their sole or primary identifier; other forms of civic identity would have been equally important. Rebillard says, "Christianness was only one of a plurality of identities available to be activated in a given situation."⁷⁶

That said, it must be stated that Christians themselves certainly felt a common identity with fellow Christians (however they defined themselves). If we read ancient religious sources such as Tertullian and (later) Augustine, we get a very different picture because they were looking through the lens of Christianity. Tertullian describes the world in which Christians operated as quite distinct from the pagans' world, but his purpose in a work like the *Apology* is to reveal to non-Christians what their fellow citizens who were Christians did and how they behaved. Yes, in certain ways Christians and non-Christians followed similar paths, rituals, and ways of behaving, but Christians also observed rituals and ethical precepts that set them apart, especially their absolute monotheism.

We must also ask what a confessor or martyr would have thought about the identity question. It may well be true that Christians were not necessarily recognized as Christians by others and that each Christian would have had a multiplicity of identities that they would have enacted in different situations. But when a Christian became part of a group, as Perpetua did, took instruction, and prepared to be baptized, this person was marked off from others who did not practice Christianity. He or she was probably putting his or her life in danger (depending on the circumstances) and also perhaps endangering the lives of his or her family (cf. *Passio* 5.2–4). This person might become the target of anti-Christian mobs (as with the martyrs in Lyons and Vienne). And, if a martyr like Perpetua was arrested (by force or by choice) and put into prison to await trial, was condemned, and was awaiting a gruesome death, this martyr-in-waiting surely had only one identity: Christian. For such people, Christianness was not an intermittent event in their lives; it *was* their life.

Who Policed the Religions in the Roman Empire?

Who decided which religions were sanctioned and allowed to function freely without government interference and which ones should be deemed illicit and their members punished if they did not follow the dictates of the emperor or his designees? Were there imperial edicts condemning Christians who refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods? Were there empire-wide persecutions? Was the main policing of this new and strict religion done at the imperial or the local level?

When Perpetua and her group were sentenced, it was by Hilarianus, the procurator and acting governor of the province.⁷⁷ Despite the possible presence of the emperor Septimius Severus and his family in neighboring Lepcis Magna during the arrest and execution of Perpetua's group (see Chapter 4 of this book), there is no evidence that he knew about or had sanctioned the trial and sentencing of Perpetua and her fellow Christians. It seems to have been Perpetua's bad luck to have drawn Hilarianus as her judge and sentencer; other governors might have taken a far less harsh stance and been concerned less with religious ideology than with maintaining law and proper boundaries.

Our earliest source for the threat of Christianity and the response of an emperor comes in a famous letter in about 112 CE from the Roman

writer Pliny the Younger, who wrote when he was governor of Bithynia, to the emperor, Trajan. In *Epistle* 10.96, Pliny asks Trajan how he should respond to the people who were being denounced to him as Christians. Pliny had no experience of being at a judicial inquiry (*cognitio*) and did not know how to conduct such an investigation, how to mete out punishment, how to determine what exactly the crime or the charge was, whether to accept evidence from anonymous sources and informers, and whether to punish those who were no longer Christians. Pliny tortured two slave women to extract information but only found in them *superstitio prava et immodica* (“a depraved and immoderate superstition”). Pliny had those who confessed to being Christian executed (except for Roman citizens, who were sent to Rome), and released those who said that they were not Christians and who sacrificed to the Roman gods. Trajan, in his response (*Epistle* 10.97), in general approves of Pliny’s policies and actions. Trajan tells Pliny to punish those who confess to being Christians but not to hunt Christians out or to accept anonymous information. Neither Trajan nor Pliny appeals to any universal rule; they surely would have if one had existed.⁷⁸

Two other early writers, Tacitus and Suetonius, had also mentioned the persecutions of Christians, under Nero. Suetonius says that Christians were followers of a new and wicked (*nova ac malefica*) *superstitio* (the same word that Pliny uses) and were thus put to death in Nero’s regime (Suet. *Life of Nero* 16.2). Tacitus, also using the word *superstitio* to describe this new cult, goes into greater detail, saying that the *Christiani* were hated for their crimes (*flagitia*). Many Christians who admitted their religious affiliation were arrested, and then gave evidence against others, who were convicted “for hatred of the human race” (Tac. *Annals* 15.44).

Christians seem to have been condemned for being a Christian,⁷⁹ not for any supposed crimes associated with Christianness (such as congregating for meals or other unauthorized purposes). If someone had been a Christian but had a change of heart, recanted, and sacrificed to the gods, Pliny’s tendency was to let him or her go.

From our available (if scanty) evidence for the treatment of Christians in the early days, it appears likely that the persecution of Christians came not as a result of an imperial edict but was left up to the whims or ideology of a local governor or procurator, who was free to make his own judgment and to mete out the punishment he felt was suitable.⁸⁰ There are certainly those who argue that there were general

laws against Christians that emanated from Rome, perhaps in Nero's time or perhaps later under Septimius Severus.⁸¹ But there is little reason to believe that there was an empire-wide persecution under any emperor until Decius in 249, who then required all Roman citizens in the empire to make sacrifice to the gods and to have a certificate to prove that they had done so. Septimius Severus seems not to have developed a harsh policy toward the Christians; Tertullian even calls him *constantissimus principum* ("the most steadfast of emperors") in his *Apology* (4.8), which was written in 197–198 CE. The persecutions that we do know of from the early part of his reign seem largely to be due to mob violence, hostile local prosecution, or personal denunciations.⁸² Some believe that later in his reign there was an imperial edict issued against conversion to Christianity, but the evidence for this is slim and unreliable.⁸³ Persecution seems largely to have depended on the local prosecutor, not on the emperor, and to have been sporadic and localized.⁸⁴

The Roman governor had great influence on the lives and trials of Christians in his province, and the main action against Christians was on the local level.⁸⁵ There seems to have been no general or coherent policy coming from Rome and the imperial administration on how or how much to punish Christians (or other religious sects) until the mid-third century to the early fourth century.⁸⁶ There may have been a general sense of what constituted unacceptable religious behavior (as is suggested in Trajan's letter to Pliny), but this did not translate into an imperial policy until at least the mid-third century CE.⁸⁷ The main charge brought against a Christian when he or she was brought to trial was that that person was a Christian, and the main concern of Roman officials was that the Christians be participating members of the wider Roman community and not in a separate community of their own.⁸⁸ It was in this respect that Christians were felt to be dangerous and more of a threat than other religious groups in the empire.

What Difference did Christianity Make to Everyday Life?

As we have seen, Christians cannot be seen as belonging to an entirely separate world from non-Christians nor were they always characterized by their religious identity. The particular behavior of Christians, if it can be isolated or generalized, is easier to define and describe in the later periods when Christianity became the officially recognized religion of

the empire; it is less clear and identifiable in the second–third centuries.⁸⁹ Shaw, in his monumental study, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine*, begins his final chapter with “Who are you?” He continues, “The question had been at the center of the crisis in African Christianity, as bishops and priests, deacons and lay persons, landowners and tenants, fishermen and money-changers, craftsmen and civil servants, and itinerant gangs of young men and women mobilized the full panoply of memory, knowledge, and emotion that guided their actions as Christians.”⁹⁰ He speaks of enforced communal identities (more common in this later period than in the second–third centuries), but cautions that being Christian was only one of many possible identities an individual might choose.

In his study of Christians and their identities in North Africa, Rebillard argues that we should not be swayed by theologians like Tertullian, who tries to show Christians how to reconcile their faith and their role in a pagan society; to think this way is to adopt Tertullian’s point of view, which leads us in the wrong direction.⁹¹ Christians were present in all the different social groups in Carthage; they could be slaves, from the lower free classes, or from the local elite (for example, the members of Perpetua’s group, who seem to have come from all these social classes). In Tertullian’s *Apology*, Christians are presented as unexceptional (again, we must take into account that, in this work, Tertullian is attempting to convince pagans that Christians were not unlike them in many ways).

Thus the Christian identity of an individual mattered only intermittently in his or her everyday dealings; that part of a Christian’s identity might not have been regarded as more important than another facet, depending upon the situation in which he or she found himself or herself. We should not imagine a binary split between Christians and non-Christians but a situation that was fluid, complex, and unstable.

Susanna Elm, in her study of Emperor Julian and Gregory of Nazianzus and the competing discourses about them, says, “the interplay between Julian and his Christian elite subjects, and the reaction his actions caused, reveals that the boundary between pagans and Christians is so porous that it renders these categories almost meaningless for modern analytical purposes It is the historian’s duty . . . to go beyond the easy oppositions such narratives offer on the surface. Digging deeper reveals far more complex interactions, as behooves persons who

had far more in common, namely a deeply cherished shared culture, than divided them—even if their gods were not entirely the same.”⁹²

On a cognitive and methodological level, I agree completely with Elm. But, if we return to the situation highlighted in this book, Perpetua and her martyrdom, we must be very careful to consider the particularity of this woman and her circumstance. Those Christians who belonged to a house-church group and who were so fully committed to their faith that they were willing to give up their families and their lives (often in a particularly gruesome way) are clearly to be differentiated from both non-Christians and even from those Christians who were less committed and willing to bend their principles and actions. If some Christians enacted their “Christianness” only in certain situations, a woman like Perpetua had made a decision that her Christian identity mattered more than any other identity she might have inhabited. Her Christian identity was not intermittent. It completely defined her.

6

Perpetua's Life

Family (Natal and Christian), Education, and Social Status

Perpetua's Life

Any facts that we really know of Perpetua's life are found in the second section of the *Passio*:

Taken into custody were young catechumens: Revocatus and Felicitas, his fellow servant in Christ, Saturninus and Secundulus. Amidst these was Vibia Perpetua, well-born, educated in the manner of a free person, and married in a respectable fashion. Perpetua had a father, mother, and two brothers, one of them also a catechumen, and an infant son at the breast. She herself was in her twenty-first year.

We are told that her name was Vibia Perpetua, that she was about twenty to twenty-two years of age (*erat . . . ipsa circiter annorum viginti duo, Passio* 2.3), well-born (*honeste nata*), educated in the manner of a free person *liberaliter instituta*, and married in a respectable fashion (*matronaliter nupta, Passio* 2.1). She had a father, mother, and two brothers living; one brother died at a young age. One living brother, like Perpetua, was a catechumen. Finally, she had a baby son, still nursing. And, we are told, she wrote the narrative following this passage in her own hand (*manu sua*).

We do not know, then, much about her. Even the facts given here are disturbingly vague. The three descriptive phrases could be interpreted in any number of ways. We hear more about her father and infant son later in the narrative, and about her group of fellow martyrs, especially Felicitas and Saturus (who is arrested later), in the accompanying narrative, which was written by her confessor or an editor.

What don't we know? We don't know with any certainty where she was from: perhaps Carthage, where she died, or Thuburbo Minus, a town about 36 miles west of Carthage.¹ Nor do we know why her husband is nowhere mentioned. Did she have one?² If so, where was he when she was arrested, sentenced, and put to death? Nor do we know how educated she was, although the *Passio* tells us that she spoke Greek (13.4), and her text (if it is hers) is fairly sophisticated in its expression.³ We do not know what her relationship was with her fellow martyrs nor what their social status was. Was Felicitas a slave, Perpetua's slave? Was Felicitas the partner of Revocatus? What was the social status of Perpetua—what does *honeste nata* mean and who were the Vibii? Why was her group arrested and not other Christians (for example, her own brother)? Why did a young nursing mother choose martyrdom over motherhood, and what effect did her choice have on her family?⁴

While it is not possible to answer with any certainty most of these questions, we can reach some tentative conclusions both by reading the text of the *Passio* carefully and by using evidence from other sources from roughly the same period. I have already discussed the probable authorship and authenticity of the *Passio* and Perpetua's role in producing it (Chapter 1); although we cannot determine how Perpetua's text came to be written, we can extract from the text as a whole, in conjunction with other material from that period, some information about the social structure, families, and education of women in the early third century CE.⁵

Even as seemingly simple a matter as Perpetua's age is disputed. The text says, *erat autem ipsa circiter annorum viginti duo* (*Passio* 2.3). This is usually translated as “she herself was around twenty-two years old” (Farrell and Williams 2012). Shaw takes this to mean that she was “near the end of her twenty-first year in age, that is to say, twenty years old in our terms.”⁶ She was, then, in her early twenties, probably not yet twenty-two years old.

The social status of Perpetua's family is also debated. She is introduced in the text as Vibia Perpetua (*Passio* 2.1). The Vibii are attested in Africa

from the first century CE: Three Vibii were proconsuls (but none is attested after Vespasian's reign).⁷ Perpetua's family probably received Roman citizenship from one of these proconsuls,⁸ and thus her family had been Roman citizens for over 100 years by the time of Perpetua's birth. If Perpetua's family was from Thuburbo Minus, as the Greek manuscript implies when it says that she and her group were arrested there, her family may have been part of the local ruling decurial class. There is little evidence of any sort remaining from Thuburbo Minus, but it was close to Carthage and in a fertile agricultural region, so it would have been, as Shaw says, "a local centre of some consequence."⁹ Although it seems very likely that Perpetua's family had been Roman citizens for generations (and may even have been Roman citizens when they settled in Thuburbo Minus, which was created as a *colonia* for Roman soldiers)¹⁰ and that they were prominent members of their community, it is unlikely that they held senatorial status.¹¹ Those who argue for senatorial status point to the descriptor *honeste nata* used of Perpetua in *Passio* 2.1, but the word *honestus* was often used of people of respectable rank (decurial or equestrian) but not of senatorial rank.¹²

Another consideration that is often brought up in connection with the status of Perpetua's family, especially her father, is that Hilarianus, the procurator, acting proconsul and presiding magistrate at Perpetua's trial, orders Perpetua's father to be knocked down and beaten with a rod out of frustration for her father's lack of ability to shake Perpetua's resolve (*Passio* 6.5). It would be highly unusual for a member of the *honestiores*, certainly for someone of senatorial rank, to be treated in this way. Thus, unless Hilarianus was out of step with the law or custom of not applying corporal punishment to members of the higher social orders, this passage militates against Perpetua's father being of senatorial rank at the very least.¹³

Kate Cooper proposes an interesting reading of this situation that seeks to explain some peculiarities of Perpetua's story and goes beyond the explanations given by scholars thus far.¹⁴ She suggests that some of the information given to us in *Passio* 2 about Perpetua's status—indeed the only real information that we have—might be wrong and might have been supplied by a later editor who found Perpetua to be a "more disturbing and subversive figure than the ancient editor was happy to admit."¹⁵ Cooper points to a number of puzzling details in the narrative that call into question whether Perpetua was really *honeste nata*, *liberaliter instituta*, and *matronaliter nupta* (*Passio* 2.1). Why, for

example, was her baby handed over to her family when, if she were a married woman, Roman law said that a child born in wedlock would be given to her husband's family? Why was Perpetua nursing her baby herself? And why does her father tell Perpetua that her baby would likely not survive in the event of her death (*Passio* 5.3)? Most families of means would have hired a wet nurse. One answer might be that Perpetua was not in fact *matronaliter nupta* (married in a respectable fashion) but was living in concubinage with the baby's father. In this case, the baby would have been returned to her, not to his, family. Perpetua would not have been *honeste nata*, not from the upper classes. In this context, the cruel and demeaning treatment of her father by Hilarianus and the fact that she was herself nursing her baby would make more sense.¹⁶

If we do not choose to believe Cooper's suggestion that Perpetua was unmarried, a concubine, and a member of the *humiliores* (persons of lower social status) and not the *honestiores*, we must somehow grapple with the peculiarities of the text that seem to tell us one thing in the description of Perpetua's status, family situation, and education in *Passio* 2.1, while containing several details that are difficult to explain in this context. We can otherwise explain the absence of Perpetua's husband (if he was), but the puzzle of her father's status and treatment by Hilarianus and of the disposition of her baby after Perpetua's death remains.

Perpetua's Family

As we have seen, Perpetua was likely from a well-to-do family of local prominence in or near Carthage. We know from *Passio* 2.2 who the members of her family were: father, mother, two brothers (one a catechumen), and an infant son. We find out in *Passio* 7 that she had a third brother, Dinocrates, who had died in his seventh year. Perpetua's father also mentions a maternal aunt (*materteram*) in *Passio* 5.3.¹⁷ We are told in *Passio* 2.1 that Perpetua was *matronaliter nupta* ("married in a respectable fashion"), but her husband is nowhere mentioned except in the later *Acta*.¹⁸ In addition to her natal family, she has her Christian family group, which includes her teacher, Saturus, and the others arrested with her, Revocatus and Felicitas (both possibly slaves and possibly related), Saturninus, and Secundulus (*Passio* 2.1, 11–13, 14–15, 17–21).

Perpetua's father is the family member and character who appears most frequently in her narrative. Four times he comes to appeal to

Perpetua to abandon her ill-considered conversion to Christianity, return to her natal family, take care of her baby son, and resume her normal social and familial roles.¹⁹ Four times Perpetua denies him. As we see in other chapters in this book (1, 2, 8), Perpetua's father does not act in accordance with the behavior expected of a respectable Roman man, father, and head of household. Such a man should have acted in a restrained and controlled manner. Rather, he becomes violently angry, attacking her as if he were going to pluck her eyes out and employing the arguments of a devil (*argumentis diaboli*, *Passio* 3.3). Further, when he leaves Perpetua, he is a defeated man (*victus*, *Passio* 3.3), a posture unusual for a respectable Roman male and head of household, especially since he was defeated by his own daughter.²⁰ In this passage, as elsewhere in the interactions of this father and daughter, attention is called to their close (but contentious) relationship, with the repetition of words that describe their familial roles: *pater* (3.1, 3.3, 3.4); *pater meus*, *filia*, *patri*, *pater*, *filiam*, *patris mei* (5.1, 5.2, 5.5, 5.6); *pater*, *patris tui*, *pater*, *patris mei* (6.2, 6.3, 6.5); *pater meus* (9.2). In each of their encounters, other family members are mentioned prominently, always by the father in his attempt to use attachment to family as leverage to get Perpetua to give up her quest for martyrdom. Only in their first encounter (*Passio* 3), when the group was still under house arrest, is no other family member mentioned. In subsequent meetings, and with his desperation increasing, her father asks her to give consideration to her brothers, mother, aunt, and son, the nursing infant who "will not be able to live on after you die" (*Passio* 5.3). It is not clear whether he is more concerned with playing on her feelings for her family (especially the baby) or threatening her with the dangers to the family if she undergoes martyrdom (*Passio* 5.2–4).

In their second encounter, Perpetua's father reveals his diminished status and masculinity in two ways. First, he calls Perpetua not by her proper familial name, *filia*, but rather by the word *domina* (Lady), a status term that indicates authority over the household or even of a master over a slave (*Passio* 5.5). To further underscore this extraordinary reversal of status between *pater* and *filia*, we see her father weep, kiss her hands in a suppliant fashion, and throw himself at her feet (*Passio* 5.5). As Cobb points out, the reader's gaze is held on this moment at which "the physical positions of father and daughter graphically illustrate the inversion of authority and masculinity."²¹ We are thus left at the end of this section with the disturbing picture of Perpetua as *domina*, standing

over her weeping, suppliant father, with Perpetua delivering a lecture to him about God's will.

Perpetua's father appears soon again in *Passio* 6, after the martyrs are taken to their hearing in the forum. As Perpetua begins to confess, her father, in a more aggressive mood, immediately appears, holding her child, and drags her from the steps, saying, "Perform the sacrifice. Pity your child" (*Supplica, Miserere infanti*, 6.2). At this, the judge, Hilarianus, takes up the father's case, telling Perpetua to sacrifice and show mercy on her aged father (*parce canis patris tui* ["spare your father's grey head"]) and her child (*Passio* 6.3). Perpetua, as before, refuses, simply saying *non facio* ("No, I am not going to sacrifice", 6.4). At this, her father loses his composure again and tries to "shake my resolve" (with Perpetua using the same wrestling metaphor, *deiciendam*, that she had used in their last two encounters in *Passio* 3.1 and 5.1). Hilarianus, losing his patience over this disturbing display of female intransigence and male loss of control over self and daughter, orders the father to be beaten. The father's only act of defiance is to refuse to give back the child to the imprisoned Perpetua when she asks for him (*Passio* 6.7).

As the day approached for the martyrdom, Perpetua's father appears one last time, in the same state as earlier, prostrating himself before her and tearing hair out of his beard (*Passio* 9.2).²² He was, as earlier (*Passio* 5.1), "overcome with exhaustion and anxiety" (*consumptus taedio*, 9.2), reduced to a state of impotence, attempting now with his words to move Perpetua, "words that would move all of creation" (*dicere tanta verba quae moverent universam creaturam*, 9.2). Her father's only attempt at physical force comes in *Passio* 6, where he tries to drag Perpetua off the *catasta*, the platform that she had mounted for the trial. Not only is this act of physical violence unsuccessful but it ultimately leads to the father himself receiving violence from Hilarianus (*Passio* 6.5).

Thus the figure of the father is increasingly demasculinized over the course of his four visits to Perpetua, with an emphasis on his loss of control, his inability to shake Perpetua's resolve, and his act of prostration before his daughter, and a focus on his pathetic and feeble old age. Meanwhile Perpetua becomes ever stronger, taking on masculine characteristics that her father has lost.²³

Such an emphasis on the demasculinizing of Perpetua's father and her own increasing strength in the face of various kinds of masculine

pressure applied to her downplays one puzzling aspect of these sections of the *Passio*: Perpetua's compassion and pity for her father and her focus on his miserable old age. How are we to read Perpetua's obvious discomfort with the treatment of her father both by herself and by Hilarianus, and yet her complete intransigence in maintaining her Christian identity? At first, in *Passio* 3.1–4, Perpetua is relieved when her angry father leaves her alone and she is able to recover her spirits (*refrigeravi*, *Passio* 3.4). There, however, she alludes to the fact that he was trying hard to shake her resolve only out of love for her (*pro sua affectione*, 3.1). When he next appears, he is “overcome with exhaustion and anxiety” (5.1) and calls on her to have pity. Here Perpetua ascribes his behavior to his *pietas* (*Passio* 5.5), and she grieves over his wretchedness since only he of all the family members would not rejoice in her martyrdom.²⁴ She tries to comfort him (although nothing she says would have done so), and he leaves, “*contristatus*” (completely grief-stricken, 5.6).

In the most sustained picture of their interaction, *Passio* 6, our pity is evoked for Perpetua's father from two different focal points: Hilarianus, who prevails upon Perpetua to show mercy on her old father and her son (*Passio* 6.3), and Perpetua, who says that when Hilarianus ordered her father to be beaten, “my father's pain hurt me as much as if I myself had been beaten—I grieved for this wretched old man” (*dolui pro senecta eius misera*, 6.5). The last glimpse we are afforded of her father is in *Passio* 9, shortly before the day of martyrdom. Among many other visitors the martyrs had on the cusp of their martyrdom was, for the last time, Perpetua's persistent father, who had apparently not been dissuaded by the beating he had received. Again, he is described as *consumptus taedio* (“overcome with exhaustion and anxiety”, 9.2; cf. 5.1). Despite his obvious and overwhelming despair here, where he tears at his beard, prostrates himself, curses his old age, and utters words that would move all of creation, Perpetua seems to be less moved than before, saying simply “As for me, I was grieved for his unhappiness in his aged years” (9.3). She seems here now entirely focused on her impending martyrdom and less concerned with the human drama unfolding around her. She no longer refers to him as *pater* but more abstractly to his *senecta*, his old age.

We see, then, Perpetua moving from her position in the family as loving and beloved daughter (see *Passio* 5.2, where her father says that he favored her before her brothers) to someone who has removed herself from her natal family and entered a different kind of family. She is

no longer dependent as a daughter should be, but confident in her own position and fearless of the consequences. Thus her father's pleas about devotion to family, the danger to her baby, and the possible disgrace of and danger for her family should she persist in her faith fall on deaf ears.²⁵

One statement that Perpetua makes about her father is especially puzzling and has led to very different interpretations. In *Passio* 5, Perpetua remarks, after seeing her father weep and address her as *domina*, that only her father of all her family would not be rejoicing in her martyrdom (or "suffering": *solus de passione mea gavisurus non esset de toto genere meo*, 5.6). Shaw takes this to mean that the family line referred to is not her natal family but rather the family line on her father's side, which included her husband. These relatives (including her mysteriously missing husband), having no sympathy with Christianity, would take joy from her suffering, but her father alone of these relatives would not because of his love for Perpetua (although he was not a Christian).²⁶ Alternatively (and I think, more reasonably), if we translate *passione* as "martyrdom" and not "suffering," Perpetua must mean that, while the rest of her family (mother, brothers) is Christian and rejoices in her coming martyrdom, her father alone of them is not a Christian and does not take any joy in a martyrdom he does not understand.

Perpetua's missing husband is also a puzzle. No mention is made of him in the *Passio*, only in the later accounts in the *Acta*.²⁷ Once again various conflicting explanations have been advanced. As just mentioned, Shaw proposes that her husband was somehow related to her father's side of the family, was himself pagan, and was "frankly hostile to her decision to become a Christian."²⁸ Thus Perpetua had rejected him, and he is no longer in the picture. If he was part of her father's line, this would explain why her father and not her husband would be given care of her baby when Perpetua died.²⁹

Other theories abound. Osiek suggests that Perpetua's fellow martyr, Saturus, was her husband.³⁰ Saturus is a central character, but he is not introduced with the others in *Passio* 2.1. He only first appears in *Passio* 4.5, where he receives little introduction as if the audience already knew the story of him and his arrest. In this vision (Perpetua's first), Saturus leads her up the ladder. In *Passio* 11–13, the vision of Saturus, he and Perpetua are together without the rest of the group.³¹ And in *Passio* 21, Saturus and Perpetua are the last two martyrs mentioned. Osiek claims that theirs was the strongest relationship in the *Passio* and that perhaps

their marital relationship did not need to be mentioned because it was so well known. This theory has not gained much traction. Cooper's theory, previously mentioned, that perhaps Perpetua was living in concubinage and not married to the baby's father, explains some oddities in the text but means that she must have been from a poorer family than is otherwise supposed.³²

I believe that it is most likely that Perpetua, like many Christian and ascetic women,³³ had renounced her husband, who was likely neither a Christian nor sympathetic to Christianity, and that thus he was not a part of the story.³⁴ This still leaves the question of the disposition of her baby up in the air, but I believe that this is the most reasonable explanation for the absence of the husband or of any mention of him.³⁵

It is notable that in the later versions of the *Passio*, the *Acta*, an interrogation at the trial is added with questions directed at the martyrs about their families, specifically their husbands and children. In *Acta* I (though not the shorter *Acta* II), Perpetua and Felicitas are asked whether they have husbands. Felicitas answers that she has one whom she has rejected and that he is not present. Likewise Perpetua is said in *Acta* I to have a husband who is there at the trial and who begs Perpetua to live with him.³⁶ Such questions about family members are asked here only of the female martyrs, not of their male counterparts. Shaw emphasizes that in the *Acta*, the men are separated from the women in the trial proceedings and that the different questions asked of the two women are clearly gendered.³⁷ Shaw believes that the authors of the *Acta* were clearly troubled by the women's deviation from traditional family ties and sought to reinsert familial relationships into the narrative.³⁸

Felicitas

Although Felicitas is not a member of Perpetua's natal family, she was probably a member of Perpetua's household or extended household, and she is second only to Perpetua in importance in the Christian position that they inhabit. She is often said to have been Perpetua's slave or servant, but there is no evidence for this; the text simply says that she was the *conserva* of Revocatus, one of the other martyrs (*Passio* 2.1).³⁹ This has been variously understood to mean that Felicitas was the spouse or fellow servant in Christ of Revocatus, or his sister, as the later *Acta* says.⁴⁰ She is clearly of low social status (her single name tells

us that she belonged to the *humiliores*), but it is difficult to know exactly what her social status was. The term *conserva* often means a slave belonging to the same family as someone else,⁴¹ and the word used here in the Greek manuscript of the *Passio*, σύνδουλοι (*syndouloi*), similarly would mean that both Felicitas and Revocatus were slaves, not that they were married.⁴²

Thus the text seems to tell us that Felicitas and Revocatus were both slaves and slaves from the same household group, but not that they were married or that Felicitas was Perpetua's slave. The term *conserva* might further distinguish Felicitas and Revocatus from Perpetua, who seems from *Passio* 2.1 to have been from a higher social class.

Felicitas and Perpetua have a closer bond than Perpetua does to the other catechumens in several ways. They are the only two women in the group (and the only two names memorialized later on in Augustine and Quodvultdeus and on the church calendar); they are mothers or soon-to-be mothers and described as lactating; and both are somewhat mysteriously lacking husbands. In the final sections of the *Passio*, during the martyrdom, Perpetua and Felicitas appear together, both facing a wild cow. When Felicitas is knocked down, Perpetua offers her help and raises her up; then "both women stood together, side by side" (*Passio* 20.6). The word *pariter*, "equally" or "side by side," is used here of them. Thus, whatever Felicitas' status, Perpetua and Felicitas are now equal.

Felicitas has an afterlife in the later *Acta*, which follow the *Passio* probably by two centuries.⁴³ In the *Acta*, several things are added to the picture of Felicitas that is given in the *Passio*. First, there is an interrogation of Perpetua and Felicitas, separate from the interrogation of the male martyrs. Second, Felicitas' husband is now mentioned, although he is not present. During the interrogation, the proconsul asks Felicitas, "Do you have a husband?" Felicitas answers, "I have one whom I have now rejected."⁴⁴ In answer to the proconsul's question about where the husband is, Felicitas says, "He is not here," and she further adds that he is a plebeian. Also here we are told that Revocatus is the cousin of Felicitas (*congermanus*, *Acta* I.5.6).⁴⁵

Felicitas is prepared to give up everything in her civic, familial, and social life in order to become a Christian and to die for that cause. The proconsul questions Felicitas on her choice, especially as regards the baby to whom she will soon give birth. Felicitas answers firmly, saying, "I am a Christian, and it has been ordained that I despise all these things because of God." Like Perpetua, Felicitas is fully prepared, without

qualms, to renounce her family, even her baby; she has a new set of parents and a new family in her fellow martyrs (*Acta* I.5.6).

The story told about Felicitas in the *Passio* is fuller and more dramatic than what we find in the *Acta*, although the *Passio* centers much more on Perpetua and her visions than on Felicitas. The *Passio* is more focused on the details of the martyrdom itself and omits the interrogation of everyone except Perpetua.⁴⁶ Here we find a pregnant Felicitas, who is only concerned that she will not be able to join her fellow martyrs in their day of glory because she is pregnant.⁴⁷ She and the others pray that she might give birth early (she is in her eight month), and their prayer is granted (*Passio* 15). Felicitas, after a painful labor, gives birth, explaining to a prison guard, who taunts her and asks her to compare her present pain with that to come in her martyrdom, that during her martyrdom, “there will be another in me who will suffer on my behalf because I am going to suffer for him” (*Passio* 15.6). She then gives birth to a baby girl, who is given to a fellow Christian sister to raise.

On the day of their martyrdom, when Felicitas and the others enter the amphitheater,⁴⁸ Felicitas rejoices that “she had safely given birth so that she might fight against the beasts, from blood to blood, from the midwife to the gladiator, to wash after her birth-giving in a second baptism” (*Passio* 18.3). According to the early Christians, martyrdom was a second baptism, so she would be “washed again” (with blood) when she was martyred.⁴⁹

Perpetua and Felicitas are first forced to wear the pagan robes of Ceres (who, with Saturn, was widely worshipped in Africa and assimilated to the native gods and goddesses Baal Hammon and Tanit).⁵⁰ After Perpetua successfully argues the military tribune down and refuses to wear this pagan outfit into the arena, the women are stripped and dressed in nets, thus exposing the bodies of these two young mothers, one of whom (Felicitas) was still lactating. The spectators “were horrified seeing one delicate young girl and the other who had recently given birth, her breasts still dripping with milk” (*Passio* 20.2). The women were thus called back and dressed in unbelted robes to please the spectators. They then faced the beast especially chosen to attack them: a savage cow (*Passio* 20). In the *Passio*, the death and martyrdom of Perpetua is given a more dramatic and complete description than that of Felicitas. We are told that Perpetua is thrown by the cow, falls down, sits up and rearranges her tunic so that she is modestly covered (cf. Chapter 2), and fastens her disheveled hair with a pin. She then notices that Felicitas has

also been knocked down (*Passio* 20.6)—which we had not been told earlier—picks her up, and stands with her, side by side. The two are then sent back through the Porta Sanavivaria, the Gate of Life, through which victorious gladiators went. Felicitas is not mentioned by name again, although she is presumably included in the group of martyrs who were brought back into the arena to be dispatched with a sword in front of the spectators (*Passio* 21.6–7).

This is what we know of Felicitas and Perpetua from the *Passio* and the *Acta*. But we should remember that some critics and readers question the entire story and point to the fictive,⁵¹ literary, and generic elements of it. Judith Perkins focuses on the motif of the maternal body. She argues that the “centrality of the female body and human birth processes in the debates of the time (in, e.g. the *Passio* and Tertullian) calls into question the historical veracity of the *Passio*’s emphasis on lactation and parturition in its portraits of the two women martyrs. Their depictions are so rhetorically pertinent to the discourse of the period in Carthage . . . as to make suspect the women’s authenticity as real persons.”⁵² Were then the representations of Perpetua and Felicitas in the *Passio* (and *Acta*, following the *Passio*) influenced by the contemporary theological debates around Christ’s real flesh and his real birth and “crafted to fit a specific historical argument,” as Perkins maintains?⁵³ The possible rhetorical nature of the text could call into question its historical reality. Perkins does not necessarily think that her reading nullifies the possibility of reading the *Passio* as a reflection of reality, but she finds Felicitas the more questionable of the two characters, especially since she is not mentioned in Perpetua’s part of the narrative and seems to be a doublet of Perpetua’s character (or redundant, as she puts it) and a less developed figure.⁵⁴ It is interesting, then, that the *Acta* take the trouble to flesh out Felicitas’ character; this could underline Perkins’ claim that Felicitas is less developed (and thus was easier to expand or build upon), but it also adds to her reality quotient by turning her into a more complex character.

Another factor in our consideration of the possible historical reality of the *Passio* is the fact that there are also clear literary Greek and Roman precedents for portions of the text (cf. Chapter 3 of this book). After Perpetua is thrown by the savage cow, she tries to save her modesty by covering her exposed thigh with her robe and pinning up her disheveled hair (*Passio* 20.4–5); here we are reminded of similar scenes stretching back to Euripides’ *Hecuba*, where Polyxena tries to cover

herself as she is falling to the ground (568–70). This motif is then picked up by Ovid, who refers both to Polyxena (*Met.* 13.479–80) and Lucretia (*Fasti* 2.833–4).⁵⁵ While the echoing of motifs from Greek and Roman literature is unsurprising since classical writers borrowed from each other as a matter of course, these literary elements force us to balance the interweaving of rhetorical and literary figures with the historical realities that we so desperately want to find in such martyr texts.⁵⁶ This returns us to the fraught questions asked in Chapter 1 of this book about authenticity and genre. Is this history or fiction? Or a hybrid that allows us to combine the two? As we saw in Chapter 3, there are other clear and undeniable similarities and borrowings among martyr narratives, the novel, and the apocryphal acts. Thus we must accept this hybridity as a part of the *Passio* and other martyr narratives. The fact that they use inherited motifs from other works does not prevent us from seeing in such narratives a glimpse into historical events and Christian life in Carthage.⁵⁷

Perpetua's Education

Just how literally are we to take *Passio* 2.1, where we are told that Perpetua is *liberaliter instituta* (“educated in the manner of a free person”)? How well educated was Perpetua? And what exactly does that mean? Did she know Greek? Could she have been reading the Greek and Roman authors who were circulating in her lifetime (or earlier) and who seem to have influenced her portion of the narrative? Was she well educated enough to have written a highly rhetorical and sophisticated narrative?⁵⁸ Was a Christian woman’s education different from a pagan woman’s education? What exactly would Christian catechumens have studied? Was a provincial woman’s education different from a woman’s education in Rome? We can hope to find some answers to these questions not in anything that Perpetua or the narrator says (or anything that is said about her) but by letting the text itself reveal what kind of education she might have had.⁵⁹

The text itself, however, can produce entirely conflicting judgments. So Shaw praises Perpetua’s directness and simplicity, and he calls the *Passio* “a piece of reportage stripped of the illusory rhetorical qualities of other martyr *Acta*,” while Ronsse finds the *Passio* a narrative that shows “rhetorical knowledge and skills (that) are consistently evident

throughout the entire hagiography.”⁶⁰ It is undeniable that there are in the *Passio* reminiscences of the Bible and allusions to other works, both pagan and Christian,⁶¹ but that does not necessarily indicate a long familiarity with or instruction in Christian theology or non-Christian authors.

Most current scholarship downplays the idea that Christians did not receive an education in pagan authors and that there was necessarily an irreconcilable split between Christian and pagan education.⁶² Barnes’ careful analysis of Tertullian’s references to classical authors indicates that Tertullian was familiar with many more classical, pagan authors than we might imagine, and probably not in compendium form.⁶³ But, if we grant that it is likely that anyone in Perpetua’s social class would have received an education in classical authors before she became a catechumen and started formal religious education, how far can we carry that? Would her few years (if that) of education in reading classical authors have enabled her to produce a rhetorically sophisticated work such as some see in the *Passio*?⁶⁴ What elements in the *Passio* could reveal a fairly substantive knowledge of classical pagan authors?

We need to try to determine whether Perpetua could have received a classical education in pagan authors, and, if so, how far she could have come before her marriage (when she almost certainly would have stopped her formal education).⁶⁵ After this point, on her conversion to Christianity and during her catechumenate, how deeply immersed did she become in Christian authors, the Bible, and earlier martyr acts? Traces of both pagan and Christian writings may be found in the *Passio*, but they are difficult to verify.

If Perpetua was given the typical education of a Roman girl of a fairly highly placed family (as we assume her family was), she would have been taught by a *magister ludi* (an elementary schoolteacher) until about the age of twelve or thirteen, then educated by a *grammaticus* until about fifteen–eighteen years of age. If then Perpetua married at about 18, she could have completed the full course in grammar and at least some training in rhetoric.⁶⁶ With a *grammaticus*, she would have read more poetry than prose, probably not full texts but selected passages.⁶⁷ She likely also knew some Greek (and is said to converse in Greek with a bishop and presbyter in *Passio* 13.4), and she may have read some Greek authors with the *grammaticus* (see Chapter 1 for her knowledge of Greek).⁶⁸ It is more likely that she studied some Greek texts than that she spoke Greek.

If she received at least this much formal education, would she then have been able to read Roman authors, such as Apuleius, or the Bible, or other *acta martyrum*, and could she have written a text marked by prose rhythms and a fairly sophisticated use of rhetoric? Most scholars, on reading the *Passio*, are convinced that she was indeed educated enough to have written a rhythmic prose that contained sentences ending with *clausulae* (rhythmic close of sentences in Latin prose).⁶⁹ Shewring's study of the *clausulae* used by the three different authors of the *Passio* makes a compelling case both for three different hands at work, rather than a rewriting of the whole by an editor, and the conscious use of specific and distinct *clausulae* by Perpetua.⁷⁰ Perpetua's *clausulae* and cola are distinguished by both quantitative and accentual rhythm. Such facility with prose rhythm indicates a fairly advanced education with a *grammaticus*, or even a *rhetor*.⁷¹

It also seems that Perpetua had gained rhetorical skills as part of her education. Ronsse goes the farthest in her "Rhetoric of Martyrs," arguing that Perpetua's "'liberal education' has made her a skilled orator and formidable rhetorician; she is a capable visionary fighting with and over images."⁷² Perpetua's skills are, Ronsse maintains, consistently evident throughout, in both her arguments with various male figures and her visions.⁷³ We can see these skills in her first meeting with her father, where she presents a clear philosophical justification for defining herself as a Christian (*Passio* 3.1–3):

"Father," I said, "do you see—as an example—this vessel lying here—a pitcher or whatever it is?"

He said, "Yes, I see it."

And I said to him, "So it can't be called by another name than what it is, can it?"

And he said "No."

"And so, in the same way, I can't say that I am anything else except what I am: a Christian."

Then my father, angered by this word, threw himself at me as if to pluck my eyes out but he only shook me and departed, defeated, along with his devil's arguments.

Perpetua's argumentation here shows a surprising level of sophistication in its careful definition, use of an everyday object to discuss

and exemplify larger issues, and mastery over her father, who tries to wrestle her away from her faith with his words (*me . . . verbis evertere cupiret*, *Passio* 3.1). McKechnie says that there is a “Platonic ‘feel’ in this . . . dialogue,” as we see Perpetua’s using the Law of Identity (“an *urceolus* is an *urceolus*, a Christian is a Christian”) and rebuffing her father’s attempts to dissuade her with his words as a fallacy in argument.⁷⁴

Perpetua also goes head-to-head with other male figures in later parts of her narrative. She argues for better treatment for her group and succeeds in getting the tribune to back down (*Passio* 16.2–4), and she refuses to wear the robes of Ceres when the prisoners enter the arena (*Passio* 18.4–6), arguing in a systematic way that once again makes the tribune yield to her reasoning as “injustice recognized justice” (*agnovit iniustitia iustitiam*, 18.6).⁷⁵ Perpetua’s ability to defeat with her arguments men who had power over her in various ways shows both a trained mind and a self-confidence and authority that we would not expect in a young woman of her age.

Perpetua might well have read both Christian and pagan or secular texts in her years of schooling, and there is evidence for both in the *Passio*. It is not the case that, once she started her catechumenate, she would have read only the Bible and Christian texts. Tertullian says that secular learning is an important part of a Christian’s training, and Eusebius tells us that Origen, who taught catechism in Alexandria at the time of Perpetua’s death, included for his students secular literature and philosophy before they studied the Bible.⁷⁶ Perpetua thus likely had studied secular, pagan authors both under the *grammaticus* and in her catechumenate.

Clear evidence of exactly what texts she studied, absorbed, and used in the *Passio* is, however, hard to find. Robinson is unequivocal that Perpetua’s visions are fully indebted to canonical scripture, for example her use of the ladder in her first vision, which seems to most readers to recall Jacob’s ladder in Genesis.⁷⁷ Robinson finds other details that are not found in canonical scripture but can be located in the Shepherd of Hermas and other noncanonical texts.⁷⁸ Peter Dronke, on the other hand, although he thinks that Perpetua was (newly) acquainted with biblical texts, denies that her visions were inspired by the Bible. So he says, “Thus in the first vision the ladder Perpetua sees must not be

equated with Jacob's ladder, nor the shepherd with the Good Shepherd, nor the cheese with the eucharist."⁷⁹

But Dronke is amenable to the suggestion that "the most important *literary* stimulus to the images in her dreams may well be Vergil rather than the Bible," and he also suspects that Perpetua had read Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* before her conversion.⁸⁰ Shaw, in his discussion of the female resistance to sexual manipulation and punishment of their bodies, says that such elements predate Christian martyr texts and are found in the "'popular literature' of the period, like novels, to which a literate woman like Perpetua would have had access."⁸¹

Thus, many scholars and readers of the *Passio* believe that it is very likely that Perpetua was quite well educated, in both secular and biblical texts, and was able to cite or refer to passages from what she had read in her secular schooling with a *grammaticus* or in her catechumenate. Others claim that she had a good grasp of prose rhythm and a sophisticated manner of delivering her narrative. But the skeptics disagree and find at most a passing acquaintance with secular or biblical passages or prose rhythm. Bradley examines the parallels that Dronke cites between the *Passio* and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* and concludes that "it is plausible, if not attractive, to believe that Perpetua had read the *Metamorphoses*," but he finds the evidence to be very weak.⁸² Ameling, in his detailed examination of Perpetua's education, is inclined to believe neither that she had a sure grasp of prose rhythm nor that she knew well any classical literature; she gives no evidence, he finds, of being "somebody of high literary tastes and education," and she nowhere quotes directly any classical author.⁸³

One other aspect of Perpetua's writing is important for our assessment of her education and training. Her writing style has been dubbed by some a "feminine" style of writing: emotional, personal, colloquial, informal, intimate, without rhetorical flourishes or didacticism, repetitively paratactic, and emphasizing the concrete or real rather than abstractions (cf. Chapter 1 for more on her style).⁸⁴ While it is not possible to isolate a peculiarly feminine way of writing, there are similarities between the way in which Perpetua writes and the style of other women writers from late antiquity or early medieval times. Her style has been seen by some to arise from a matrix of oral communication, a particular and peculiar way of speaking in narrative that we cannot access, pin down, or find in other sources.⁸⁵

Conclusion

I believe that Perpetua's narrative is unique enough that we cannot define precisely either her style or the education that produced this work. Her style seems to be characterized by elements of orality, but this need not mean that she lacked an education or that such a style could not have arisen from or been formed by some rhetorical training.⁸⁶ Perpetua writes in a manner that is somewhat like that of certain other women writers after her (for example, Dhuoda, a ninth-century Frankish writer), but her mixture of directness, clarity, personal reference, and literary/biblical allusions is all her own.⁸⁷ Her text is impossible to put into a category or genre because it does not follow any rules. From her writing, we can ascertain that she was well educated for a woman of her age and social class and that she undoubtedly knew some biblical (and noncanonical) texts and secular texts, and knew them well enough to make reference to them often in her *Passio*, if not in a specific way. She never quotes directly from them, but, in her straightened circumstances, we would not expect her to do that. Her style is direct and personal, displaying an oral affect, but she also shows some knowledge of rhetoric and prose rhythm. She reveals an amazing capacity to explain her personal visions, her interactions with others, her faith, and her determination in a style that was a product of her own particular circumstance and the education she had received as pagan daughter and catechumen.

The Conditions of Martyrdom in the High Roman Empire

Defining a Martyr

As we have seen in Chapter 3, it is not easy to define what we mean by the term martyr since there are many different kinds of martyrs, who are driven by very distinct motives. Even in Perpetua's time, we find that pagan and Christian martyrs differ in at least one major respect: The Christians looked forward to life after death, to heaven, to redemption. Not so for pagan martyrs.¹

Before we discuss what the term martyr meant in the first centuries of the empire and what characteristics these martyrs seem to have in common, we need to make one important point clear. Martyr tales were constructed texts, composed and embellished by authors who were interested in creating stories that would have the power to imbue other or potential Christians with the desire to become martyrs themselves. Martyr tales are at least partly fictionalized narratives just as were the apostolic acts and the Greek novels.² The texts may have arisen from a historical context, but they developed and changed over time as they became part of church liturgy, were read to the faithful, and were altered by later editors. Questions about the authenticity and historicity of the martyr narratives have been raised by many scholars, most recently Candida Moss. Her book, *The Myth of Persecution*, proposes that the Christians were in fact very rarely subjected to a sustained or targeted persecution and that martyr stories were written largely to promote the theme of persecution in order to portray Christians as the victims of

hostile acts, to show the Christians as superior to others, and to create an opposition between Christians and non-Christians.³ Moss argues that the danger in reading and interpreting these texts lies not in the texts themselves but in the way they are used.⁴ While we can never recover the original intention of a story, including Perpetua's, we need to keep in mind that such texts both arose out of a particular historical context and were later changed and embroidered by various editors, church fathers, and others for their own purposes.

As we have noted, the word martyr comes from the Greek μάρτυς (*martys*), μάρτυρος (*martyros*), which originally meant "witness."⁵ It only came to refer to someone who was willing to die for a cause in the second century CE. The earliest attested use of the word martyr to mean "someone put to death at the hands of hostile secular authority" is the death of Polycarp, which probably occurred in the first half of the third century.⁶ If the word was used at that point to indicate a particular dedicated religious act, the concept of martyrdom must have existed already for some time; Bowersock points to Ignatius of Antioch in the early second century CE as a person who exemplified the traits of a martyr before the term was actually used.⁷

Other scholars define martyr more broadly than Bowersock, who says that the kind of martyrdom exemplified by Ignatius or Perpetua was something new, not seen before the second–third centuries CE.⁸ Boyarin partly rejects this claim, and he proposes that, rather than conceiving of martyrdom as a particular or single thing, we imagine it as a "discourse," as a practice of dying for God and of talking about it, a discourse that changes and develops over time and undergoes particularly interesting transformations among rabbinic Jews and other Jews, including Christians, between the second and fourth centuries."⁹ He maintains that we find martyrdom in the narratives, not in "what happened."¹⁰

Boyarin presents the following three elements that mark late antique martyrdoms (as opposed to earlier acts of dying violently for a belief): 1) a "ritualized and performative speech act associated with a statement of pure essence (e.g., "I am a Christian") becomes the central action of the martyrology"; 2) "the death of the martyr was conceived of as the fulfilling of a religious mandate per se" (for Christians, the imitation of Christ's suffering); 3) "powerful erotic elements, including visionary experience."¹¹

Two potentially conflicting ideas are present in the many attempts to define what a martyr is and to differentiate Christian (or Christian and

Jewish) martyrs from pagan martyrs. First, there are clear commonalities between Christian martyrologies of the imperial period (second–fourth centuries CE) and the earlier pagan martyrs such as Lucretia or Regulus, named by Tertullian (among others) as having died brave and noble deaths.¹² We can list many elements that Christian martyrs have in common with their pagan counterparts: noble and heroic self-sacrifice with a focus on honor; opposition to authority; choosing to die a painful death; seeing a benefit in death.¹³ But the Christian martyrologies from the second to fourth centuries differ markedly from the pagan accounts in at least one respect: the matter of faith and belief in an afterlife. The Christian martyr narratives exhibited one trait not seen in earlier acts and accounts of those acts: the concept of posthumous recognition and reward.¹⁴ These Christian martyrs speak a particular truth with absolute confidence, even joy, a truth based on their certain faith in God and in a better life in the afterworld. They do not fear but welcome death and suffering. Suffering becomes, in a sense, an end in itself; the more intense their suffering, the greater their victory.¹⁵

Judgment on the acts of both Christian martyrs and others who sacrificed themselves depends to a great degree on the cultural, religious, or philosophical values of the viewers and commentators on these deeds. The Roman categories designated by words like *sacratus*, *sacramentum*, *honor*, and *sacer* are notoriously fluid and can denote both admirable and despised behaviors. As Barton says, “the very pleasure in suffering that the Romans admired in the gladiator, in a Regulus or Scaevola, they might mock in a Christian.”¹⁶ The same act of defiance, bravery, or voluntary death could be regarded as contemptible or praiseworthy. The word *sacramentum*, first used of a soldier’s oath, is later adopted by Christian writers like Tertullian and applied to martyrs (whom Tertullian often compares to soldiers; cf. Chapter 2 of this book).¹⁷ When a soldier, or a soldier in the service of God (a Christian), swore this oath (*sacramentum*), pledging to be “wounded, hewn to pieces, slain,” these acts could be viewed as either glorious or despicable.¹⁸

Although we may agree that there are convincing parallels between the actions and motivations of early Christian martyrs and some of their pagan counterparts (whether soldiers, gladiators, or citizens), there remains the one distinguishing factor in the behavior and choices made by Christian martyrs: their belief in an afterlife and a reward beyond their lives on earth.¹⁹ This belief framed their actions in the face of grave

threats and punishments. They used the language of honor and heroic bravery, as did pagan writers, but it was in the service of a higher cause.

Despite the fact that the narratives of these brave acts are what compelled readers, listeners, and followers, and what compel us today, the words accompanying the deeds and explaining the significance of the deed are insignificant without the deeds themselves. While we may not be able to separate the deeds from the words, and indeed the words are all we have, it was the deeds themselves that found the Christians their disciples and cemented their place in Christian liturgy and history. Tertullian says that the Christians had more influence than the pagan philosophers like Seneca, who counseled endurance of pain and death but who gave birth to fewer disciples because they did not teach by deeds (*nec tamen tantos inveniunt verba discipulos, quantos Christiani factis docendo, Apol. 50.14*). The inspiration from the followers, he claims, springs from seeing the deed (*contemplatione*), which causes the viewer to want to suffer (*Apol 50.15*).

*Chosen Death*²⁰

Tertullian, in his *Apologeticus*, makes the following claim about his fellow Christians: “Certainly we wish to suffer, just as a soldier wants to in battle” (*Apol. 50.1*). Not only did Christians offer themselves up to suffering with equanimity; they did so with joy and laughter. So Perpetua and her group marched into the amphitheater on their way to die, feeling elated and cheerful (*hilaes*), trembling with joy (*gaudio, Passio 18.1*). Christians became so enamored of suffering into martyrdom that they were accused by many of committing suicide, of wishing too much to die.²¹ Many stories illustrate these overeager martyrs, including that of Germanicus, who impatiently dragged on top of himself the beast with which he was condemned to fight.²² Perhaps the most famous story illustrative of the voluntary martyrdom of early Christians is that told to us by Tertullian about a crowd of zealots who appeared in Asia before the Roman governor Arrius Antoninus in the late second century CE. After they all announced that they were Christians and appealed to the governor to put them to death, he, having sentenced a few to death, advised the others to seek the nearest cliffs to jump from or to find ropes to hang themselves from.²³ This Roman official, like many others of rank and experience including even the emperor, Marcus Aurelius, were puzzled

about why these Christians volunteered to die and expected others to make this act possible.²⁴ Marcus Aurelius and others regarded this act of voluntary self-sacrifice as completely irrational and impossible to comprehend. Even committed Christians like Cyprian condemned the voluntary and overeager martyrdom engaged in by many of his fellow Christians.²⁵

Although Christian martyrs arose from the Roman tradition of the noble hero who fought bravely for a cause, the Christians were different in that they believed in suffering for its own sake, and, when they underwent this physical pain, they believed that they were imitating Christ's Passion. The role of the Christian sufferer was fundamental to the whole enterprise of this religion.²⁶ These martyrs held a special place in the imagination of the early Christians, both those who were awaiting martyrdom like Perpetua (so-called "confessors") and those who had accomplished their martyrdom. They also, according to the narratives we possess, held a special relationship with God, both during and after their death.²⁷ So Perpetua believes (and her brother believes) that she has the power while in prison to ask for a vision (*Passio* 4.1–2) and to intercede for the dead like her brother Dinocrates (*Passio* 7.2–3). Perpetua's brother says to her, "My lady sister, you are held in such high regard now that you could request a vision and you will be shown whether you will suffer martyrdom or release" (*Passio* 4.1). And then she thinks to herself, "And I, because I knew that I could converse with the Lord, whose great blessings I had experienced, promised my brother confidently and said to him, 'Tomorrow I will report to you'" (*Passio* 4.2). She then asked for and received her first of four visions.

Perpetua's group and a few other known groups of Christians from the second to early third centuries CE set the standard for these brave and noble Christian martyrs who were more than willing to suffer and to do so in a public venue so that their suffering might be seen and imitated. The early martyrs achieved power by and in the act of giving up their lives for a higher cause.²⁸

The idea of a chosen death or death by volition has always been regarded as problematic, both by the Greek and Roman philosophers and by Christian writers.²⁹ The act of suicide was condemned by Augustine, but the notion of a volitional death as practiced by many martyrs comes perilously close to suicide (see Chapter 8 of this book). When Perpetua guides the hand of the bungling gladiator to her own

throat at the end of the *Passio*, her act is often taken as a suicide: “But Perpetua, *so that she might taste some pain*, cried out as she was pierced to the bone. And *she herself guided the trembling hand of the inexperienced gladiator to her own throat*” (*Passio* 21.9, my emphasis). Embracing death willingly is not necessarily committing suicide, but in many cases the martyrs, who stress their free will, seem to hasten or to be complicit in their arrests and their deaths (cf. *Passio* 18.5 on free will). It is not clear in many instances why a Christian or a group of Christians was arrested, including Perpetua and her companions, and many Christians must have voluntarily given themselves up to the authorities in order to become exemplary martyrs. These voluntary martyrs puzzled many among them, especially pagans, who could not understand their zeal for death.³⁰ The phenomenon of voluntary martyrdom or suicide is complex, and what we call it depends largely on our own religious and cultural view. Martyrdom has usually been seen as a positive term or act, suicide as a negative term or act, at least from the time of Augustine.

The ambiguity of these terms and acts can be seen very clearly in the case of recently unfolding events in the Middle East, which have brought the term martyrdom again to our attention in a very real way and have caused us to consider once more how differently this act is viewed depending on what religious, cultural, or ethnic background you belong to. What we call “suicide bombers,” those devoted to their cause in countries like Syria, Iraq, or Palestine might call “holy martyrs.”³¹ These martyrs seem often to be driven by forces similar to those of the Christian martyrs: a belief in admission to a better afterworld, a belief in a higher religious power, and certainty that a conscious act of martyrdom endows the martyr with a power and reputation that another kind of death would not offer. Suffering and pain seem of little concern in relation to the reward that is expected after death. In recent years, martyrs (from groups like ISIL) have made a conscious and developed use of social and other media in order to promote their cause and to win converts; we might compare this to the Christian use of narratives and various public displays of their faith (including turning themselves into the Roman authorities even when the Romans tried to dissuade them from doing so).

The issue of the voluntary martyrdom of Christians, then, is fraught. While we cannot say that martyrs actually committed suicide, it is clear that Christian martyrs did have a choice of behaviors, of whether to sacrifice on behalf of the emperor and to the Roman gods or to refuse.

Some martyrs made this choice, but in a quiet way; others, as we have seen, made more of a spectacle of their profession. And the fact that many early church leaders like Clement, Cyprian, and Augustine spoke out against “athletes of death” (as Clement put it), indicates that there was a wide range of Christian martyrs, some of whose ostentatious behaviors angered the church fathers and caused them to speak against the practice of voluntary martyrdom.³²

Early Groups of Martyrs

What do we know of other martyrs before and contemporaneous with Perpetua? There are two early groups of martyrs from the second century for whom we have good evidence: a group from Lyons (Lugdunum) and Vienne who wrote a letter to another group of Christians in Asia detailing their story in 177 CE and the Scillitan martyrs in 180 CE. Each group comprised both men and women, as did Perpetua’s. Before Perpetua’s time, female martyrs were found in groups or “collective” martyrdoms, and in these groups (unlike Perpetua’s), the focus was on the male members.³³

The story of the martyrs of Lyons and Vienne, preserved by Eusebius, tells of a group of men and women from Gaul who, in the reign of Marcus Aurelius, were set upon by a mob and eventually executed in various ways.³⁴ According to Eusebius, many Christians were beaten and stoned in Lyons, and members of this one group were executed. Eusebius praises the manner in which these martyrs, “athletes of piety,” handled themselves during their ordeal; he will record their valor, he says, which dared so much. This group contained men, as we might expect from Eusebius’ comparisons of them with athletes, but there were also women, notably a slave, Blandina. She too is hailed by Eusebius as a noble athlete similar to one of her fellow male martyrs, Maturus, another brave contestant.³⁵ Eusebius singles out Blandina as being of particular courage, confounding her tormentors with her unending strength of mind and body. She, along with some of her male fellow Christians (Sanctus, Attalus, Potheinus, Maturus, Alexander), endured the most unimaginable torments but held firm to their faith in God, thereby infuriating the crowd and driving them to demand even harsher punishments. One other woman, Biblis, is singled out by name; she was one of about ten Christians who were weak, were unable to

endure the conflict, and thus denied their faith. But some of these, Biblis among them, who were tortured anyway, gained strength from the torture and then confessed their faith.³⁶

Blandina stands out from this narrative as the most courageous of all, especially, Eusebius says, because she was female and thus not expected to display such strength and determination. In many ways, Blandina is the Perpetua of the Lyons and Vienne story (or, we should say, Perpetua is the Blandina of her story), except that Blandina was a slave. Her courage was then doubly remarkable; it was she, a slave, who lent courage to her mistress when the mistress feared that her resolve would fail her. Eusebius remarks that it was through Blandina that Christ showed that “things that are mean and ugly and contemptible among men are vouchsafed great glory with God because of the love towards him shown in power and not boasted of in appearance.”³⁷ Like Perpetua’s, Blandina’s death is saved for last, the culmination of the spectacle. This was the standard place for female victims in the arena, and the mutilation of female bodies made the end of the display that much more horrifying.³⁸ Blandina’s death at last comes at the hands of a bull, the “quintessential male beast,” while, in a unique twist, Perpetua meets her death with a wild cow, especially chosen to mock her womanness.

The other group of martyrs who preceded Perpetua and her companions and of whom we have detailed knowledge were the Scillitans. They were, like Perpetua’s group, from North Africa, but we are not certain where the town of Scillium (or Scilli) was and even what exactly its name was.³⁹ The town was probably near Carthage and was small and rural; beyond that we cannot speculate.⁴⁰ There is remaining a bare-bones (and probably partial) judicial proceeding of the trial; this tells us that there were seven men and five women in the group⁴¹ and that the martyrdom was on July 17, 180 CE, three years after the martyrdoms in Lyons, in the reign of Commodus.⁴² The governor who presided over the trial, Vigellius Saturninus, was proconsul in 180–181; he was, we believe, the first governor to execute a Christian.⁴³ During the trial proceedings, Saturninus has three men and three women brought in, but mainly questions one man, Speratus, who seems to speak for the group. Saturninus attempts to make Speratus reflect on and recant his claim to be a Christian, offering twice an adjournment, but Speratus refuses, with the others shouting their approval of Speratus’ position. Apart from Speratus, three women speak

one sentence confirming their belief. After Speratus refuses again to go away and reflect on his confessions, Saturninus sentences all twelve to death by the sword. He lists the seven men first and the five women following. Thus, although the number of men outweigh the number of women (as in the case of Perpetua's group), we are left with the women's names as the last mentioned. However, in the case of the Scillitans, a man (Speratus) is the chief spokesperson. There is no Blandina or Perpetua here as a focal point.

This early group martyrdom in Africa could not have sprung out of nowhere. The fact that there was an organized group of Christians who were willing to give their lives for their belief in God and who refused to back down at trial surely indicates that Christianity had taken root in Africa some time earlier. These were uncompromising Christians who set the stage for their later brethren's intransigence in the face of certain torture and death.⁴⁴ Thus we must imagine that Christianity had taken root in and around Carthage at least by sometime earlier in the second century CE.

If we could pinpoint exactly where the town of Scilli or Scillium was, we would know more, perhaps, about where Christianity first began to flourish in Africa. But one thing is clear: This town was small and not urban. This group of Christians seems, unlike Perpetua, certain to have come from the countryside and probably to be from the lower, peasant classes. Two of the Scillitan martyrs, Nartzalus and Cittinus (or Cintinus), have native Punic names.⁴⁵

The surviving transcript of this trial in 180 CE, therefore, is a precious document that tells us, despite all the problems it raises, something about the rise of Christianity in Africa close to Perpetua's time and her place of residence. The same insistence on their faith is present, the same profession of thanks to God, the same camaraderie and mutual support among the group members. But in the short twenty-three years between the Scillitan martyrs and Perpetua, much seems to have happened. Christianity is now present in the city, the members are now from a diverse set of circumstances, including a woman, Perpetua, who was from a fairly high social class and was fairly well educated. Or, had Christianity started in the city and then spread to the countryside (see Chapter 4 of this book)? We do not know the answers, but it is clear that the Scillitan martyrdom in 180 CE, in the early days of Christianity in Africa, held the seeds of Perpetua's martyrdom just one generation later.

Punishment

The now-familiar story (mentioned above and in Chapter 4) about the proconsul of Asia, Arrius Antoninus, who was known to be a violent judge and prosecutor, is a telling anecdote about attitudes toward Christians and their punishment in the reign of Commodus (the 180s) in Asia. Antoninus, beset by a group of Christian voluntary martyrs who were eager to be punished and make an example of themselves, obliged a few of the crowd and sentenced them to death, but told the others, “You wretches, if you want to die, you have cliffs (to leap from) and nooses (to hang by).”⁴⁶ What do we learn from this story? That many Christians insisted on giving themselves up voluntarily to a painful death even when Roman governors and judges urged them not to, and that even a Roman governor who was known for his animosity toward Christians was not in favor of wholesale executions and perhaps did not take the zealousness of would-be martyrs as seriously as they might have wished. We might ask this question: Who was more invested in having harsh punishments meted out to zealous and insistent Christians, the Christians themselves, who often seemed eager to suffer pain and to receive the maximum penalty, or the Roman authorities, who were anxious both to punish and to put a stop to this religious movement but also not to allow them to turn their martyrdom into a recruiting tool? Did the Christians exaggerate their persecution in order to augment their cause and to occupy the position of the Other?⁴⁷

Whatever side of the debate we take, we know that early Christians were often punished and punished severely. Christians who were Roman citizens or upper class were usually given the less extreme punishment, *ad gladium*, beheading. Those who were not citizens and belonged to the lower classes were usually sent to the arena to be dispatched by the beasts. But, as we know, this did not always hold true. Perpetua and her group were all sent *ad bestias*, to the beasts, and we know of other instances where the rules were not followed.⁴⁸ This ambiguity about social and civic categories and forms of punishment was largely due to the wide choice that local governors had over whom they sentenced and how they sentenced their prisoners.

How did the early Christians represent the pain and suffering they experienced in seeking their martyrdom? Judith Perkins, in her work on pain and suffering in the early Christian era, says that we have in these

early Christian narratives a community of sufferers who represent and define themselves in such a way as to enable Christianity's growth as an institution.⁴⁹ The focus in the martyr narratives on the details of the suffering body helped to create this institution that, counterintuitively, gave power to the very people who were under attack and who seemed not to hold any power.⁵⁰ The suffering body was under divine supervision or regulation but also seen as imitating divine suffering, through Jesus, and thus attaining a closeness to Jesus' suffering.⁵¹

The suffering of martyrs and others in the early empire is made explicit in texts ranging from the martyr narratives to the acts of the apostles and the medical texts. Among many possible examples, we may recall Blandina, one of the Lyons martyrs in 177 CE, who, although a female and a slave, was the strongest member of her group in suffering pain beyond all understanding and not yielding until she was completely broken.⁵² Blandina was "filled with such power that she was released and rescued from those who took turns in torturing her in every way from morning until evening and they themselves confessed that they were beaten, for they had nothing left they could do to her and they marveled that she still remained alive, seeing that her whole body was broken and opened, and they testified that any one of these tortures was sufficient to destroy life, even when they had not been magnified and multiplied."⁵³ Eusebius says that Blandina only kept getting stronger, like a noble athlete, and she maintained that, since she was a Christian woman, nothing terrible could happen to her. She was subsequently led out to face the beasts. She was hung on a stake, seemingly in the shape of a cross, and offered up as a prey to the beasts, but no beast would touch her. She was then returned to jail to await another contest. Finally she was brought out again, "rejoicing and glad at her departure as though invited to a marriage feast rather than cast to the beasts."⁵⁴ She endured scourging, attack by beasts, being burned on red-hot irons, and finally being put in a net and thrown to a bull, whereupon she finally succumbed. Never before had the pagan spectators seen a woman who had suffered so much and so long.⁵⁵

Such descriptions are standard fare in the martyr narratives (in fact, several details here can be found again in the *Passio* in the description of the deaths of Perpetua and Felicitas). These tortured bodies, as they are represented in these narratives, are seen quite differently by the opposing sides. While the Christians were suffering terrible pain, they transmuted that pain into power over their tormentors; the more they

suffered, the stronger they became (and the more infuriated and uncomprehending the tormentors became). So, for the Christians, torture was power or gave them power.⁵⁶ On the other hand, the Romans and pagans saw the pain they inflicted as a form of justice, as bringing order into a chaotic situation.⁵⁷ They thought that their position as torturers invested them with power, but in fact it was, in the eyes of the Christians, just the reverse.

One problem with seeing this torture as pain and agony for the Christians is that the Christians themselves often claimed that what they were suffering did not hurt.⁵⁸ Time and again, martyrs seemed not to feel the pain or to say that it did not hurt because they were assisted by God.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, if any of the descriptions can be taken to be a representation of some reality, it is clear that some Christian martyrs did indeed suffer terrible punishments. It is also true that Christian authors, especially in the period after Perpetua, sometimes used exaggerated descriptions of such torments to build up a picture of Christian suffering that came to define Christianity as an institution and to gain support for it.⁶⁰

The increasing emphasis in the early empire on violent and spectacular torture of Christians (however it is represented by both tormentor and tormented) leads us to the figure of the martyr as a hero or athlete, both willing and even eager to die in as spectacular a way as possible. The Roman games in the amphitheater offered a perfect venue for a public display of cruelty, punishment, and Roman power over its opponents. It is to the arena that we now turn in order to see how the suffering and pain inflicted upon and often encouraged by Christian martyrs played out in such a public and spectacular setting.

Death in the Arena: The Physical Space

It is in the amphitheater in Carthage that we believe that Perpetua met her end, although some scholars now believe that the martyrdom took place in a military amphitheater nearby whose location has not been discovered.⁶¹ Carthage had, by the second century CE, one of the largest and most impressive amphitheaters in the Roman world, although little of it still remains. Much of it was plundered in the medieval period for its building material (particularly the bronze and lead), and, to further complicate matters, substantial alterations were made

to the amphitheater in the nineteenth–early twentieth centuries by the Pères Blancs (the White Fathers), Augustinian monks who excavated there.⁶² A recent reappraisal of the architecture and chronology of the amphitheater has shed light on its impressive size, its significance for Carthage, and the important place it held for the people of Carthage and the Roman world.⁶³ The Carthaginians seem to have had a particular liking for the games (*munera*) held in their amphitheater, and this is underscored by the large size of the amphitheater, which would have held about 30,000 spectators.⁶⁴

Judging from evidence from archaeological finds from the amphitheater and other buildings nearby, votive inscriptions, coins, lead curse tablets, and literary texts, scholars have proposed that the civilian amphitheater in Carthage was probably built initially in the first century CE, completed before 133–139, and then reconstructed shortly after 165 CE.⁶⁵ There is evidence for continuing use of the amphitheater at least until the sixth century CE. The first amphitheater was probably smaller than the later, amplified versions, seating perhaps 22,000 spectators. The date of this arena is quite early among monuments outside of Italy. It was built of local materials but otherwise its construction reflects Roman building and not indigenous techniques.⁶⁶

Sometime in the second century CE, the amphitheater was greatly enlarged, with the seating space roughly doubled. Decorative sculptures were added and an arcaded façade that rose up many stories. The area under the arena was also added or enlarged with chambers for prisoners, animals, the dead, and machinery for bringing props and animals into the arena.

With so little of the amphitheater remaining today, some of our best textual sources come from a twelfth-century Arab geographer, al-Idrisi, who described various Roman monuments in Spain and North Africa that he had either seen or of which he had secondhand accounts. He identifies the amphitheater as a “Thiater” and describes it in detail as having a façade with fifty arches in ascending tiers. Al-Idrisi says the following:

and there (in Carthage) still are famous buildings, among them for instance the theater, which has no match among the buildings of the earth as regards worth and power. That is because this theatre was built in circular form, and is about fifty

arches standing in the air, as to width, each arch is more than thirty spans, and between each arch and its sister (is) a column.⁶⁷

From this quite detailed description (which goes on at some length), we can ascertain that the amphitheater was large and magnificent despite some apparent exaggerations as to size.⁶⁸

Whether the martyrdom of Perpetua, Felicitas, and their group took place in the main civilian amphitheater in Carthage or a military amphitheater that is no longer extant or not yet discovered, we are able to visualize the final day of these martyrs with our knowledge of the main amphitheater in Carthage and with details provided in the text of the *Passio*. We can discover valuable information from the descriptions found both in Perpetua's text and in the narrator's portion. The prisoners were dressed in costumes of the gods Saturn (the men) and Ceres (the women), costumes that the martyrs rejected successfully (18.4–6). The men and women were segregated, with the men brought out to the beasts first (19.3–6) and then the women (20.1–6). The prisoners were occasionally able to change the minds of the guards (16.2–4; 18.5–6). The crowd reacted to the behavior, demeanor, and treatment of the prisoners in a variety of ways, and they were able sometimes to change the course of events (17.1–2; 18.7–9; 20.2–3, 7; 21.7). Such interactions among the victims and the spectators is a strong indication of how interactive this experience must have been, on both sides. The spectators were more than simply passive observers. We also learn the details of how these martyrs died: exposed to or even chained to beasts (19.3–6, where Saturus is chained or tied to a boar but the *venator* or animal fighter was gored instead and ultimately died), and then brought back again to face another beast if they did not die on the first round (cf. Saturus in 19.4–6 and 21.1–6, where he faces a boar, then a bear, then finally a leopard, which gravely injures but does not kill him). If the victims do not die from the beasts, they are dispatched at the end by a gladiator (21.6–9).⁶⁹

So by putting together our rather meager evidence from archaeological remains, descriptive (but much later) texts, inscriptions and curse tablets, and the *Passio* (whether fictional or in some way reflective of reality), we can arrive at a reasonably clear understanding of what happened in the arena during the games.

Equally important for our understanding of life and death in the arena is the dynamic of the power and spectacle displayed in the games.⁷⁰ Who held the power and what lured people not only to attend the games but also to interact quite violently with the actions displayed there? Why did even Christians go to the arena to witness the horrors of a martyr's execution? What were the rules and rituals that governed the behavior of both martyrs and spectators in the arena?

Death in the arena could work in two different ways, depending on the circumstances: It could either reaffirm or could subvert the social and political order. If a victim behaved in the way that both the authorities and the spectators desired, showing terror and pain, the social order was affirmed and restored. But if, as often happened with Christian martyrs, the victim displayed bravery and confidence in his or her beliefs and was a witness to truth, the civic or imperial authorities failed in their mission and the social order was undermined.⁷¹ In addition to the attitude and demeanor of the victim, it was important that the proper rituals be followed, as in so many other parts of Roman society, and that the punishment meted out be suited to the social class of the victim.

Spectators and judges alike expected that the victim would be repentant, but Christians often displayed just the opposite demeanor, even rejoicing at their coming death. So Perpetua and her group "marched from the prison into the amphitheater as if they were marching to heaven—cheerful, with their faces composed, and, if they trembled, it was out of joy, not fear" (*Passio* 18.1). Such behavior must have not only disappointed the spectators but puzzled them since it ran counter to their every expectation and did not match the behavior of non-Christian victims.⁷²

Punishments devised by the Romans were extraordinarily cruel and often invented to demean or mock the particular prisoner's circumstance. One example of this mockery is the choice of a wild cow to attack two female prisoners, Perpetua and Felicitas. The execution of prisoners was part of a precise ritual presented at the games. The day was divided into three segments: first, in the morning, wild beast hunts; then executions of prisoners; and later in the day, gladiatorial combats. Each kind of event had a separate history, and the final combined set of events was thus a hybrid of practices originally conceived of as quite distinct

from each other.⁷³ *Venationes* or beast hunts, gladiatorial combats, and public executions each had a long tradition. But, by the time of Perpetua, the categories were often merged.⁷⁴ Martyrs, including Perpetua and her group, were often condemned to the beasts (*damnatio ad bestias*), and thus the first two types of events were merged, with prisoners becoming part of a beast display or hunt. Some executions were stunningly staged as enactments of mythological stories that included wild animals. So one criminal was dressed as Orpheus, who attempted but failed to charm a wild boar.⁷⁵ We also find gladiators being inserted into the death scenes of martyrs. At the end of the *Passio*, after Perpetua and Felicitas have encountered the wild cow and they are to be dispatched before the eager audience, Perpetua herself has to guide “the trembling hand of the inexperienced gladiator to her own throat” (*errantem dexteram tirunculi gladiatoris ipsa in iugulum suum transtulit*, 21.9).

Each of these events was staged for an audience that came expecting the spectacles to unfold in a particular way. The ritualistic details of these games and these executions conveyed the carrying out of justice by the local and imperial authorities, whose power was evident—or was expected to be evident—in the reactions of the condemned. If the prisoner reacted in the expected way (with appropriate terror and fear), the audience could be assured that justice had been carried out and that the power of the Roman authorities had been reinforced and confirmed. If certain behaviors did not conform to their expectations, spectators could demand a change to the proceedings. So in the *Passio*, Perpetua and Felicitas were brought out to the arena dressed in nets, but the crowd was appalled to see one frail young woman (Perpetua) and another (Felicitas) who had just given birth and whose breasts still dripped with milk (20.2). In answer to the crowd, the two young women were recalled and sent back out dressed in unbelted tunics. Thus the crowd was able to alter the events in the arena and to demand that familiar protocols be observed so that the social order might be properly reinforced. It is clear not only that the spectators relied on a rather exact order of things but also that they were active participants in creating this order.

What motivated audiences not only to attend these horrific games but to attend them eagerly and to participate (mostly from afar) in the denouements?⁷⁶ Although evidence for both motivation and behavior is spotty and conflicting, we can ascertain the great interest in all aspects of these public games in both the ubiquitous representation of them on mosaics, reliefs, and artifacts,⁷⁷ and in the many references to

the games in the writers from the late republic to the early empire. It is clear that audiences came to watch for various reasons, were moved by different events, and reacted in different ways depending on their own circumstances, the type of show, and the venue. For instance, most Christians who came to the games attended for very different reasons than their non-Christian countrymen and would have found a wholly different meaning in the violent deaths of their fellow Christians. Most of the Christian writers instruct their readers to avoid the games completely but also acknowledge the hold that the games had on those who thronged to them.⁷⁸ Tertullian and Augustine were both forced to offer up a Christian counterpart to the games, one that Christians would be able to witness after their martyrdom.⁷⁹ Augustine says that the giver of these spectacles is God himself.⁸⁰ According to Christian writers, the Christians went to the games for quite a different reason than others might have: to witness the bold and daring Christian faith that enabled the martyrs to endure their torments and perhaps to be strengthened in their own resolve to undergo such torments in the future.⁸¹ Non-Christians might have gone to see the torments and punishments, but Christians went to view how the martyrs faced those torments and the bravery (*virtus*) that they displayed (see Chapter 2 of this book).

The conflicting responses to attending the spectacles in the Roman empire are nowhere better expressed than in Augustine's account of his friend Alypius' visit to Rome, where he was taken by fellow students to the Colosseum.⁸² Alypius had avoided these spectacles and said that no one could force him to view them even if they dragged him to the arena. But after he arrived, the roar of the crowd piqued his curiosity and caused him to open his eyes, whereupon he drank in the violent spectacle before him. When he saw the blood and savagery, he became drunk on the cruel pleasures before him and became one of the crowd, carried away by the madness.⁸³

Although the passage about Alypius and the arena does not address martyr acts directly, it tells us much about the crowd psychology that infected people who attended the games and the lure of these spectacles even for those who were not inclined to succumb to such emotions. It also directs us to the question of *seeing* the spectacles as opposed to just hearing about them. Augustine talks about martyrs not attending the games themselves, but (in his later period after the martyrdoms had ceased to be performed) about Christians listening to the martyr acts being read. Unlike those earlier Christians in Perpetua's time, who could

actually have attended and observed, the fourth-century Christians were distanced both in time and place and accessed the bravery of the martyrs only by listening and imagining.⁸⁴ It would seem that, for the Christians in the early period, imagining or seeing such deaths was a way of imitating these acts, at least in principle or intention. Or, was this act of imagining or spectating a substitution for the readers or viewers dying themselves? Hopkins proposes that the martyr acts “enable readers (or listeners) vicariously to act out the effrontery of opposition with impunity.” The hero in the story behaves courageously and finally dies bravely, but the reader will survive and can simply read the story, allowing the death to occur over and over in his or her mind.⁸⁵

Thus those early Christians who actually attended the *spectacula* in which their fellow Christians were killed might have been there to strengthen their own resolve in case they should be called upon to be martyrs themselves, or they might have been there to vicariously experience a death that they themselves did not have to undergo but a death that was at the core of the early Christian experience. Both kinds of emotions and reactions were no doubt evoked at this moment of truth.

The arena was in many ways like the theater: a site of performance where identities could be defined and where status and power were on display (both in the arena itself and in the spectators’ seats). The full drama of Roman society was on view, and every kind of Roman could be found there, both as participants and as spectators. It was Rome (or Carthage in this case) writ large.⁸⁶

If then the arena is a Romanized and Romanizing institution that both inculcated Roman values in its attenders and spectators and expected the attenders to respond in turn with displays of the kinds of behaviors that marked them as Roman men, how did the Christian martyrs fit into this picture? The martyrs would have displayed not the fear and terror of most victims in the arena or the militarism and bloodthirstiness of the spectators, but quite the opposite. They displayed a calm, even joyful, demeanor, a lack of fear of Roman authority and punishment, and a willingness to die for a cause that no one else in the Roman empire understood or acknowledged. The arena has been described as an “institution rife with cultural meanings,” which allowed emperors to “monopolize cultural images of power,”⁸⁷ but this does not quite work for the Christians. If the arena is a major site in which Roman domination was expressed, the Christians were able to use their position of resistance to undermine and contest the

ideology that so deeply informed this crucial area of Roman cultural identification.⁸⁸

The Roman authorities and the patrons of the games strove to provide a coherent image of society, one with which everyone was expected to identify. For the most part, the psychology of the arena would have supported this social experiment.⁸⁹ Most attenders, for different reasons, would have responded enthusiastically to the virility, courage, endurance, and violence that they witnessed in the various parts of the games. And for many spectators, prejudices against some of the combatants, especially criminals, would have further stoked their emotions and increased their enjoyment. But when Christian martyrs were the victims, quite different emotions likely came into play.⁹⁰ Spectators might well have wanted to see Christians punished for their real or imagined crimes, but, at the same time, the Christians' stubborn opposition to the ideology of the arena, their heroic bravery in the face of cruel punishments, and their undermining of the cohesive and coherent Roman ideals so closely identified with the arena must have created a tension and disturbed the uniform social order that the masters of the arena hoped to create.

The Nachleben of Perpetua

Her Unwitting Legacy

The Problem in the Text

Perpetua's story has inspired countless church fathers,¹ writers, and scholars after her to retell her story in their own way: embellishing, overwriting, adapting, and re-creating the original narrative (as we have it) to suit their own historical, ecclesiastical, and personal contexts and agendas.² It is not so much the actual martyr herself (if we could ever recover her) that is of concern to those who came after and who used her story, but the "remembered image" of such a woman. But such an image had to be properly and carefully re-created.³

The rewriting and remaking of Perpetua started almost at the outset. Her editor framed her experience, setting her first-person narrative in the middle of his own explication of it. As has been mentioned (Chapter 2), Perpetua's bold and courageous demeanor undergoes a transformation in the editor's frame, where she suddenly becomes modest and maternal (*Passio* 20).⁴ The editor, in ways both subtle and obvious, changes Perpetua; she turns into a Roman *matrona*.⁵

Her early editor, then, already changed the text, at least by framing it, not long after she died. And Perpetua's text and person have since then been continually subjected to the intrusive and sometimes censorious pen of later authors (mostly male), who are determined to impose their readings on her text: the authors of the later *Acta* (shorter versions of the *Passio*; see Chapter 1); other African *passiones* from the

third century (*Vita Cypriani*, *Passion of Lucius and Montanus*, *Passion of Marianus and James*; the last two do not mention Perpetua directly but are clearly indebted to the *Passio Perpetuae* for structure and content);⁶ church fathers like Augustine and Quodvultdeus, later church fathers such as Ado of Vienne and Notker; the *Old English Martyrology*; Goscelin of Saint Bertin; the thirteenth-century Dominicans Bartholomew of Trent, Jean de Mailly, and Jacob de Voragine;⁷ and down into our own times, when authors (both male and female) continue to put their stamp on this remarkable text. The earlier, ecclesiastical reconstructions were attempting to clean up Perpetua for the newly formed hierarchical and patriarchal church; Shaw calls this process a “general ‘house cleaning.’”⁸

We will, then, in this chapter examine the successive rereadings and (in some cases) distortions of Perpetua’s text in order to discover how the same figure could have been portrayed as both virgin and whore.⁹ We will try to know her through the traces she leaves, embedded as she becomes in a larger social, cultural framework.¹⁰ Those of us who work in the classical, late antique, or early Christian periods are often constrained by sources such as the church fathers, who used deeply embedded ideologies to represent women as they wanted them to be seen. Various strategies of containment were used to carry out the project of creating good female subjects; these included naturalizing, universalizing, and using norms from past myth or history to define female subjects.¹¹ In any one of these processes, the plurality and individuality of individual “women” becomes the rhetorical or ideological construct “woman,” and thus the subjectivity of women is erased.

By characterizing women as weak, cowardly, passive, overly passionate, permeable, deceptive, corporeal, and irrational, a writer could position this female subject as part of a long line of women with similar negative character traits and behaviors, and thus as someone who was acting in character and just as we would imagine. And any women who try to break out of this mold and to appropriate or emulate male traits are usually seen as, at best, hybrid and puzzling creatures, or, at worst, creatures who have transgressed their bounds unsuccessfully without being able to become the other.¹² Women are thus stuck between two impossible situations: To be stereotyped as a “woman” is to be denigrated as having a set of negative characteristics; however, to be cast as a woman trying to be a man is to leave the world of woman (in which she could operate successfully within the bounds of her limitations) but

fail always to make a successful transition to manhood since she could not ever truly become a man.

Women's traditional traits are similarly underscored and made to seem real by the system of naturalizing and normalizing employed in masculine and aristocratic narratives. Here, instead of overtly ascribing female traits to an entire sex or tribe (so we might say, "these are the vices typical of the female sex"), such conventionally ascribed female traits are seen as part of the natural order of things and accepted without challenge by both those who set the rules (normally men) and those who are governed by them (normally women). It is the observer or person with power whose ideology determines what is deemed "natural" (although traces of oppositional voices may be heard in many texts, and in particular in a text like Perpetua's).¹³ One example of a "natural" condition in late antiquity is virginity; this is the "natural" condition to which women should aspire. Any deviation is unnatural. Another "natural" condition is women's subjection to, or inferior position to, men. Should they try to be in a dominant role, they risk being portrayed as creatures who have transgressed set boundaries.

Another mechanism employed to mark women's behavior as natural or unnatural is the use of historical or mythological precedent to put a woman into a historical continuum and to set proper boundaries and models of behavior. Both biblical women (Mary, Eve) and classical figures (Polyxena, Iphigenia, Lucretia) serve this purpose and help to define female traits that have a venerable pagan past and are then put to use in Christian ideology.

The Afterlife of Perpetua

The *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* was almost continuously retold, reframed, and filtered through many centuries of different cultures and times.¹⁴ Apart from a period between the end of the third and the end of the fourth centuries, when there was very little mention in literature of Perpetua or the *Passio* (although there is inscriptional, documentary, and iconographic evidence even then that her cult was spreading not only in Carthage but also in Rome and Spain and even in the Greek East),¹⁵ there is nearly continuous use of her story by later writers, not only in Africa but in many other countries (Rome, Spain, England). Interest in her story peaked in the fifth century with Saint Augustine and

the church fathers, then resurfaced with great energy in writers of the early Middle Ages, but her cult and story never became dormant or forgotten. I give here a brief survey of some of the many later authors who made use of Perpetua's story, then focus my attention on four phases of the Perpetua text during which male figures or authors evoked distinct changes in her: the male figures in the original text of the *Passio* and her editor who framed her narrative;¹⁶ Augustine and Quodvultdeus in the fourth to fifth centuries; Notker, a ninth-century martyrologist and librarian of the monastery at St. Gall where the oldest extant manuscript of the *Passio Perpetuae* from the ninth century was located, and the thirteenth-century Jacob de Voragine whose *Legenda Aurea* (*Golden Legend*), a compilation of over 200 saints' lives, was extremely popular until the fifteenth century and survives in over 800 manuscripts.

The *Passio Perpetuae* itself, although clearly the starting point for all the many later versions and adaptations of it, became as time went on almost secondary to its later versions, which were indebted much more to the *Acta* than to the original text. After the mid-third century, during the persecutions of Decius and Valerian (the period when the *Acta* might have been written¹⁷), as the church became increasingly institutionalized and as the act of martyrdom became no longer an act to be actually imitated but rather admired once Constantine recognized and favored Christianity, the actions of the martyrs underwent regulation and reinterpretation. The subversive and potentially radical aspects of Perpetua's text, which threatened both social mores and the church teachings, needed to be sanitized and normalized, and the need for a reformed version is clear from both the *Acta* and the fact that later interpreters ensure that the version that they produce gives the newly orthodox version of Perpetua and her story. The text or story, then, went through a continuously dynamic process that responded to the cultural, social, and religious expectations of the time in which it was being rewritten. But it is important to understand that the evolution of the text is not linear but cyclical, with different authors responding to different parts of the text and sometimes resurrecting bits of the story that had been excised or altered by earlier adapters.¹⁸ So we have multiple versions of the *Passio Perpetuae* in circulation during the Middle Ages, with Perpetua being portrayed quite differently depending upon who the author was and who his audience was.

The *Acta* were the preferred version of the Perpetua story as time went on. Both Augustine and the authors of the *Acta* (whichever one

came first, and this is not clear¹⁹) cleanse the story of its most problematic aspects, for example, Perpetua's spiritual power to effect change for her dead brother Dinocrates and her upending of social categories in her rejection of her natal family and her son and her bending of gender norms.²⁰ Whether we put the *Acta* or Augustine first, both do similar work in reinforcing traditional gender categories and in erasing many of the problematic issues of gender that Perpetua represents and enacts in her narrative. Perpetua's fight with the Egyptian opponent in her fourth vision, which highlights her gender ambiguity, is very much abbreviated in the *Acta*. The *Acta* also focus more on the martyrs as a group rather than individualizing Perpetua and using her as an example of a powerful and willful woman. The large number of manuscripts of the *Acta* compared with the small number of the *Passio* would seem to indicate the greater popularity of the *Acta*, especially in later periods.²¹

By the time of Augustine and Quodvultdeus (bishop of Carthage in the 430s and younger colleague of Augustine), the text of Perpetua was read regularly in liturgical settings and thus kept alive, but it was increasingly not the original text but one that provided a version of the text corrected and filtered by the church writers and sermonizers (see the subsequent discussion on Augustine and Quodvultdeus). Augustine's interpretation of the *Passio Perpetuae* had an enormous influence over later authors and served to solidify the reception of her martyrdom throughout the Middle Ages and even up to the present time.²² From the time of Augustine and his successors, Perpetua's cult continued to spread, although the names of Perpetua and Felicitas mainly appear in lists of martyrs on their feast day (March 7) without further embellishment, for example the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum*, which probably dates from the fifth century. The period between the fifth and the eighth centuries was one of turmoil in North Africa,²³ but there is still evidence from liturgical calendars, sermons, and other official and religious texts that the cults of the North African martyrs were spread around the Mediterranean and that Christianity survived in North Africa long after the Muslim conquest until at least the eleventh century.²⁴ By the eighth century we have narrative martyrologies with biographical entries for the saints; so the Venerable Bede in the mid-eighth century briefly tells Perpetua's and Felicitas' story in a paragraph in his *Martyrology* with details both from the *Passio* itself and from Augustine's sermons. In these narrative martyrologies, we begin to see Felicitas gain equal billing with Perpetua. Other writers add more details to these paragraph-long

snapshots of martyrs; so the ninth-century Ado of Vienne includes details from Bede (the pregnancy and delivery of Felicitas, the separation of mind from body in Perpetua's martyrdom) but also adds the names of the male martyrs and the place the martyrdom occurred (here it is Thuburbo Minus, as the Greek manuscript says). About 100 years later, in 912, Notker, the librarian of St. Gall, home to our earliest manuscript of the *Passio*, wrote a very interesting poem on Perpetua, drawing from Ado of Vienne but also reconfirming the reification of gender categories that we see in Augustine's sermons (see subsequent text for an analysis of Notker's hymn).

Something interesting happens to Perpetua's story in medieval England: a return to the original *Passio* and a recuperation of some of the parts of the story that were erased or sidestepped in the intervening texts. So we find an inclusion of her fight with the gladiator in the arena (which Notker mentions but most other authors from the fourth century on do not). The ninth-century *Old English Martyrology* alludes to Perpetua's transformation into a man, her fierce sword fight, and her "masculine determination."²⁵ Another text written in England (in about 1082), the *Liber Confortatorius* by Goscelin of St. Bertin, is written in a monastic context to give advice to a former female pupil who has become an anchorite. In book 2, Goscelin uses Perpetua as an example of militancy in her faith. Once again, this text returns to the original story, highlighting Perpetua's strength as a confident, strong, and militant woman who fights for her faith.

The culmination of the reception of Perpetua's story comes in the thirteenth century with three Dominicans, notably Jacob (Jacobus) de Voragine, whose *Golden Legend* (*Legenda Aurea*), composed between 1260 and 1266, was immensely popular and circulated in more than 800 manuscripts (see subsequent text for analysis of his text on Perpetua). The most famous of the Dominican martyrologists are Jacob and two writers of his source texts: Bartholomew of Trent (Italy) and Jean de Mailly (France). All three men composed a reference work of saints' lives and feast days that could be used by preachers as they traveled around. Jean de Mailly's *Abbreviatio in Gestis et Miraculis Sanctorum* includes 177 entries, and Bartholomew of Trent's *Liber Epilogorum in Gesta Sanctorum* includes 300. Jean de Mailly was the more important source for Jacob; both wrote longer entries on the saints than did Bartholomew, and both of them drew on the *Acta* for their material. The *Golden Legend*, which remained popular into the fifteenth century,

takes the figure of Perpetua as she appears in the *Acta* and Augustine and moves her into the world of abstraction, a character driven by the power of God, and away from the historical figure of the brave, admirable, strong woman we see in the *Passio*.

THE MEN IN THE PASSIO: THE FIRST CONTAINMENT OF PERPETUA

Of the twenty-seven people mentioned in the *Passio*, twenty-three are men.²⁶ Four of these were fellow martyrs: Revocatus, Secundulus, Saturninus, and Saturus; Saturus, who gave himself up later, was probably Perpetua's teacher and is said to be the author of *Passio* 11.2–13. Perhaps the most important man in her narrative, though not one of the twenty-seven characters and not named, was her editor. We may imagine that Perpetua dictated her visions and thoughts to one of her visitors in prison, perhaps this editor, who then rewrote what she had conveyed to him and subsequently added the framing narrative. This editor thus had the opportunity to shape Perpetua as he wanted to in his sections of the narrative; it is he who has the final word on her martyrdom and death.

Several male figures occur in the four visions that comprise most of her portion of the narrative. In the first vision (*Passio* 4), in which she steps on the head of a serpent and climbs a ladder, she sees in an immense garden a godlike figure; her next two visions (*Passio* 7–8) concern her dead younger brother, Dinocrates; and her final and fourth vision (*Passio* 10), on the day before her execution, features several male figures. Pomponius, a deacon who had visited her in prison (*Passio* 3), comes in this vision to fetch Perpetua and bring her to the amphitheater.²⁷ He leads her there, pledges that he will assist her, and then departs. Perpetua then sees an Egyptian “hideous in appearance” (*Aegyptius foedus specie*, *Passio* 10.6) with whom she is to do battle; this Egyptian presumably stands for the Devil, who was, she claimed, to be her true opponent the next day in her actual contest.²⁸ Then another man appears, a paternal figure as in her first vision, so tall that he stood above the highest point of the amphitheater. He was clothed in purple robes and carrying a rod like an owner and trainer of gladiators (*lanista*, *Passio* 10.8). This man is a Christ figure, there to present her to die in the amphitheater just as an *agônotherete* or director of the games might present gladiators in the pagan games. After Perpetua wins her fight against

the Egyptian and takes the prize, the *lanista* says to her, “Peace be with you, daughter” (*Passio* 10.13).

The narrative also contains a number of other male figures who operate outside of her visions and control Perpetua’s actions in various ways, although she often fights back and holds her ground. The most important figure, and the one who appears most often, is her father, who visits her four times (three of those in prison) in an attempt to get Perpetua to recant her faith (*Passio* 3.1–3, 5; 6.1–5, 9). Perpetua firmly resists his pleadings, even engaging him in a philosophical debate (*Passio* 3) and watching him be beaten by the procurator’s guards (*Passio* 6) without yielding her resolve.

Perpetua is clearly a leader among her group of fellow martyrs. She controls, in one way or another, all the men in her story and in her visions, not only her father, but the procurator Hilarianus, whom she faces down without performing the sacrifice (6.3–4); an arguing pair of bishop and presbyter, Optatus and Aspasius, who ask her to adjudicate their disagreement (she refuses, 13.1–4); the tribune in the prison who confines the martyrs in inhumane conditions but relents under pressure from Perpetua (*Passio* 16.2–4); another tribune, who tries to dress the martyrs in pagan robes but relents under more pressure from Perpetua (18.5–6); and finally the gladiator who is assigned to kill her but fails in his attempt, forcing Perpetua to guide his hand and sword to her own throat (21.9–10). Perpetua’s actions both in her own part of the narrative and also in opposition to the many male characters who surround her cast her in a dominant and controlling role. She is independent, courageous, and brave, clearly a leader of her group, but her masculinized behavior is challenged in the last chapters of the *Passio* when the narrator describes a young woman seemingly more concerned with her modesty and her disheveled hair than with her strong female identity (*Passio* 20.4–5).

The Church Fathers on Female Subjectivity and Behavior

The church fathers and Christian writers in the early Roman empire and in the two–three centuries after Perpetua’s death in 203 CE often took as their topic of conversation the ascetic women of the church, who were “more like men than nature would seem to allow.”²⁹ The gender ambiguity and complexity displayed by a Christian woman like Perpetua set in motion a series of debates among the church fathers about the

appropriate roles for women to play. Such women of great courage and fortitude were admired for displaying masculine qualities but were also held suspect and feared because they did not stay within the expected gender boundaries and act according to code. So John Chrysostom purportedly claimed about the abbess Olympias, “Don’t say ‘woman’ but ‘what a man!’ because this is a man, despite her physical appearance.”³⁰ Likewise Gregory of Nyssa says about Macrina, “It was a woman who was the subject of our discourse, if indeed you can say ‘a woman,’ for I do not know if it is appropriate to call her by a name taken from nature when she surpassed that nature.”³¹ And in a non-Christian writing of the same period, Porphyry addresses Marcella, telling her, “Do not preoccupy yourself with the body, do not see yourself as a woman since I no longer hold you as such. Flee in the spirit everything feminine (θηλυνομένων [thēlunomenōn]) as if you had a male body that enveloped you.”³² Even the very terms for manly feminine virtue are problematic: Olympias and Melania are called ἡ ἀνθρῶπος (*hē anthrōpos*, using the generic word for man with a feminine article), and the words ἀνδρεία (*andreia*) in Greek and *virilis* in Latin are used for manliness or manly courage, each containing the word for man (ἀνὴρ [*anēr*] and *vir*).³³

The holy women after Perpetua’s time (and after the time of martyrdom) in the third–fourth centuries thus were in a peculiarly liminal position, somewhere between male and female, and it was this that gave them their special status and prepared them for the spiritual perfection or holiness that they strove to achieve.³⁴ While Paul had said earlier (in the first century) that “in Christ Jesus there is no male and female,”³⁵ this ideal of the effacement of gender difference, with its utopian and transgressive possibilities, seems to have been overwhelmed by the long-standing hierarchy of male over female. The belief in two genders with two distinct sets of inherent strengths and weaknesses stubbornly persists alongside the developing Christian idea of virginal holy women who transcended gender differences. It is not that gender characteristics do not exist for fourth-century writers like Chrysostom, but rather that such women as Olympias successfully struggled to overcome them.³⁶

What does this mean for Perpetua, who substantially predates the ascetic women of the later third–fourth centuries? Although Perpetua was herself not strictly speaking a virgin or an ascetic (this type seems to have evolved from the earlier female martyrs after the age of martyrdom³⁷), she certainly is a prototype, who has no husband in the *Passio* and severs ties with her family, including her baby son. Her transformation

into a male in *Passio* 10.7 has precedent in an even earlier martyrdom found in the Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne (dated from 177 CE), in which a woman named Biblis, who had denied Christianity, was put under torture and was transformed from a weak and unmanly (ἄνανδρος [*anandros*]) woman into a Christian.³⁸ There is then an equivalence that is drawn between being manly and being Christian. The gender instability and porousness that we see in the *Passio* does not start with Perpetua; it is present already in the martyr literature and in the New Testament. But Perpetua famously enacts this transformation and provides both inspiration for later holy women and a source of anxiety for writers such as Gregory of Nyssa, Chrysostom, Jerome, and Augustine.

Augustine's Containment of Perpetua

By the time of Augustine (354–430 CE), the cult of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas had become very popular, and the *Passio* had become a standard part of the liturgy and could not be ignored.³⁹ When Augustine gave his sermons on their annual feast day, he was confronted with a problem. How does Augustine come to terms with this brave, courageous, almost virile martyr, whose acts he could not ignore since she had become such a popular and much-read part of church liturgy? He had no choice but to accept the *Passio* as an authentic text, but he chose to reinterpret this text for his audiences so that it would be palatable both to them and to himself, and to remake Perpetua into a figure that his church could admire.⁴⁰

Augustine wrote at least three sermons in honor of Perpetua, Sermons 280–282, and she appears again in his Sermon 159A. Another sermon mentioning Perpetua has been found that is of dubious attribution and is probably not by Augustine.⁴¹ Perpetua is also present in Augustine's philosophical work, *De Natura et Origine Animae*. Perhaps this last work is the most interesting of his disquisitions on the martyrdom of Perpetua because it was not written for a specific occasion as the sermons were; rather here he introduces one of Perpetua's visions somewhat gratuitously to make a theological point against his adversary, Vincentius Victor.⁴²

Let us look first at Augustine's sermons written for the anniversary of the martyrdom of Perpetua, Felicitas, and their companions. These

were sustained reflections written on the occasion of their feast day, March 7.⁴³ Augustine, who was constrained at least to acknowledge the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas on the day that was named for this event, dwells at some length in Sermons 280–282 on their heroic exploits (puzzled though he was by the fact that the day was named only for the two female martyrs and not for their male companions). It is not unusual that Augustine acknowledges the martyr acts of Perpetua and Felicitas since he often celebrated the feast days of martyrs. But it is surprising that he devotes at least three entire homilies to this pair as this was not his common practice.⁴⁴

It is also notable that at least one of Augustine's sermons on Perpetua, 280, was given immediately following the reading of the text of Perpetua's martyrdom: "we heard when they were read to us (*cum legerentur, audivimus*) the encouragement they received in their divine visions and the triumphs in their martyrdoms; and all these things, laid out and illuminated by the light of words, we heard with our ears, we saw with our minds, we honored with our religious devotion, and we praised with love" (280.1).⁴⁵ We can surmise then that her text was read as part of the liturgy each year on her feast day, and this was followed by a homily, which was sometimes centered on her.

Augustine had to account for the fact that a woman, marked by womanly weakness (*fragilitas feminea*, 281.1), was able to perform such courageous acts, to outperform the men in her group (so that the feast day was named only for the women, Serm. 282), to become male in her fourth vision, and to resist and repudiate all the men who tried to control her (her husband perhaps, her father, the jailer, Hilarianus who sentenced her, and even the gladiator sent to dispatch her at the end). How was this possible? The female martyrs prevailed and were celebrated, according to Augustine, because where the sex is weaker, the crown is more glorious (Serm. 281.1). They are the more admired because they are women, who are weaker by nature and so not expected to perform brave and heroic physical deeds. This then sufficiently explains why the feast day is named only for the two women.

Augustine is still left, however, with the uncomfortable figure of the female hero or the virile woman. He is anxious to take apart this hybrid character and fit her into a more comfortable mold for his contemporary audience.⁴⁶ One strategy is to appeal to the Pauline idea that there will be no male and female (Serm. 280.1; cf. Gal. 3:28); the sexes will be as one, so that even in the body of a woman, the manliness

(*virtus*) of mind will conceal the sex of the flesh. But Augustine uses another strategy to foreground Perpetua's feminine nature. He admits that she stood up against her father (who was the Devil's tool), but he preserves her role as a loving daughter, saying that she responded to him in a temperate fashion, neither dishonoring him nor yielding to his deceits (Serm. 281.2). She fights bravely, but she and Felicitas are both mothers, inhabiting the ultimate female role.⁴⁷ Of course the true female forebear for women is Eve, the source of womanly weakness and inferiority.⁴⁸ Augustine connects Perpetua's stepping on the head of the serpent in her first vision to Eve: "the head of the ancient serpent, the ruin of the woman as she fell, became a step for this woman as she ascended" (Serm. 280.1). This is not a connection made explicit in the *Passio*, but Augustine draws it out in order to connect Perpetua not only with womanhood in general or womanly weakness as a trait but also to the original sin brought to women by Eve.⁴⁹ It was this she overcame by her chastity, her masculine courage, and her devotion to Christ, a devotion so great that it took her out of herself (*quo amore alienata*) and enabled her to endure the torments of the arena in an altered state (cf. *Passio* 20.8–9; Aug. Serm. 280.4).

Augustine, then, is concerned to wrest Perpetua away from the masculinized roles that she inhabits in at least her own section of the *Passio*⁵⁰ and to focus on her feminine roles and feminized behavior. She was a good daughter and a mother (interestingly, Augustine says that only one of the women was a mother, Perpetua [Serm. 282.2]; this is presumably because Felicitas gave birth only just before the martyrdom). In Serm. 282, Augustine says that Perpetua and Felicitas were *non solum feminae, verum etiam mulieres fuerunt* ("were not only of womankind but were also *mulieres*"). Shewring translates *mulieres* as "very women,"⁵¹ while Hill translates it as "wives";⁵² I might translate it as "grown women."⁵³ Clearly Augustine must mean that Perpetua and Felicitas were not only biological women but also performed normative femininity in their relations of woman to man or wife to husband.⁵⁴

Augustine thus manages to highlight their most womanly aspects (motherhood, lactation, sexuality), their masculine courage, and their sainthood. To achieve sainthood, they had to cast aside their previous familial roles; this rejection of early ties to family is strongly urged by Augustine in his *Sermo de honorandis vel contemnendis parentibus* (Serm. 159A = Dolbeau 1996, Serm. 3, especially chapter 11, where he addresses the *infirmum sexum* [weaker sex]). It then becomes possible

for women to have it all: fecundity and family, and then (once they have renounced sexuality and family ties) chastity or virginity and virile courage, and finally martyrdom and sainthood.⁵⁵ Augustine says that, because they were women and mothers, strong emotional attachments added to the innate weakness of their sex (Serm. 282.2); this ultimately worked to their advantage because their enemies assumed weakness and inability to withstand torture. These attachments produced an inner masculine strength (*interioris hominis cautissimo et fortissimo robore*) that broke the enemy's attacks.

Augustine celebrates Perpetua and Felicitas together in his sermons, and he puns endlessly on their names, frequently inserting the phrase "perpetual felicity" (Serm. 281.3, 282.1 [twice], 282.3).⁵⁶ This is a source of annoyance for anyone trying to read his sermons with any degree of seriousness. What exactly is the point? He seems obsessed in these sermons with the fact that the feast day is named for only the two female martyrs and not their male companions. He deals with this fact (a fact he was bound to accept) by so closely entwining Perpetua and Felicity that they become one; they are Woman. The repetition of their names (*perpetua felicitas*) serves as almost a chant to mark and embody their roles with a memorable, rhetorical, ritualized, mnemonic device. Was this, as some think, a way to mock them? I suggest, rather, that Augustine was trying to find a means, using a masculinizing rhetoric, of memorializing them as a pair of women linked in their everlasting sanctity.⁵⁷ By appropriating their names into his own discourse, Augustine is able to take control of the very substance of the *Passio*.⁵⁸

One other work of Augustine outside of the sermons, *De Natura et Origine Animae*, contains a particularly interesting mention of Perpetua. The use of Perpetua here (without Felicitas) is to some extent gratuitous; Augustine did not have to bring her into the text (as he was more likely to do in his sermons on her feast day). In *De Natura et Origine Animae* 1.10.12, Augustine, while refuting the views of the fifth-century writer Vincentius Victor on baptism, adduces evidence from Perpetua's second and third visions about her brother Dinocrates. Vincentius Victor had apparently argued that Perpetua had the power to intercede for the child Dinocrates when he died and to save his soul, although he had not yet been baptized. Augustine denies this and claims there is no evidence that Dinocrates was not baptized (arguing *ex silentio*), thus undercutting Perpetua's power and authority. He makes two further comments, which undermine the importance and authority of the *Passio*. First, he says that

the work was not part of canonical scripture (*nec scriptura ipsa canonica est*) and thus deserved less reverence than many people were giving it. He then adds, “Nor did she write—or whoever wrote it *vel quicumque illud scripsit*—that this little boy had died without being baptized,” and consequently questions the authorship and authenticity of the *Passio* (while at the same time feeling the need to cite her).⁵⁹

Augustine’s treatment both of Perpetua and her text in this work shows him caught in a dilemma, as he is in his sermons. He cannot dismiss her since she is a figure of importance who holds a firm place in the liturgy and church tradition. Therefore he chooses to foreground her text while at the same time undercutting its authority with the three-pronged attack just detailed: Perpetua might not have had the power to intercede for her dead brother; the *Passio* was not part of canonical scripture; Perpetua might not be the author of any part of the *Passio*. It is worth taking into account as we examine Augustine’s frequent attempts at balancing the many different aspects of these complex issues that this balancing is a reflection not only of his own probably conflicted attitudes but also of his need to address a pluralistic audience of Christians with many different identities whom he was trying to pull together.⁶⁰

Augustine’s attitude toward Perpetua and his containment of women can also be illuminated by his treatment of another Roman woman, Lucretia, made famous by Livy. In book 1 of the *City of God* (chapter 19), Augustine reexamines the story of Lucretia, the chaste wife of Collatinus, who was raped by Sextus Tarquinius and subsequently killed herself. Before her suicide, she takes revenge by making her husband, father, and their trusted friends promise to avenge her rape. According to Livy, this event was the pretext for the overthrow of the Etruscan kings by L. Junius Brutus and the beginning of the Roman republic (Livy 1.58). In Augustine’s treatment of the story in *City of God*, he takes quite a different approach to the normally revered figure of Lucretia than we find elsewhere.⁶¹ Lucretia was for Augustine “an ambivalent model of heroism,” as Trout says, embodying features both of womanly *pudicitia* and also of masculine fortitude and heroism.⁶² Thus she inhabits uncomfortably (for Augustine, at any rate) two different worlds, just as Perpetua did. Augustine faults Lucretia on several counts: She committed suicide (a practice which Augustine rejects as immoral) even though she was not guilty, thus adding her crime to the crime of Tarquinius; she used sexual purity as an excuse for heroic action (*non est pudicitiae caritas, sed pudoris infirmitas*) [“prompted not by love of purity but by the burden of

her shame”]); she cared too much for her own honor and shame in the public eye ([*laudis avida nimium*], *City of God* 1.19). Further, Lucretia’s act of volitional death was carried out by stabbing herself with a knife, a traditionally male way to die (this detail is not mentioned by Augustine, but it is a part of Livy’s account).⁶³

Lucretia was a powerful symbol, taken from Roman history, for the Romans, an exemplum to be followed by Roman women. She is also, I suggest, a possible model for a strong female figure like Perpetua, who guided the knife in the gladiator’s hand to her own throat when he was unable to complete the task (*Passio* 21.9) and could thus be accused of having committed volitional death, using a male method of dying.⁶⁴ And Perpetua, like Lucretia, was an ambivalent figure, embodying at once female chastity (or nearly so) and modesty, yet a masculine fortitude and demeanor (no lowered eyes for Perpetua, *Passio* 18.2), sacrificing herself (perhaps needlessly or too publicly) for a higher principle and maybe too conscious of her own honor and shame.⁶⁵ Like Lucretia’s, Perpetua’s own story has been transformed by the many men who wrote it.

Quodvultdeus, Bishop of Carthage

Quodvultdeus, Augustine’s younger colleague and bishop of Carthage in the 430s, wrote works so much in the style of Augustine that he was long known as “pseudo-Augustine.”⁶⁶ It is not, therefore, surprising that his descriptions of Perpetua and Felicitas are very similar to those of Augustine in his sermons, though with more attention to the female body and its functions. Like Augustine, Quodvultdeus asks why the two women in the group of martyrs are given mention before their fellow male martyrs; his answer (like Augustine) is that it is because their weaker sex either equaled or even surpassed the bravery of the men: *quia infirmior sexus aut aequavit, aut superavit virorum fortitudinem*.⁶⁷ Like Augustine, Quodvultdeus has Perpetua and Felicitas trampling on the serpent’s head;⁶⁸ like Augustine, Quodvultdeus makes frequent reference to Eve as the basis for women’s weakness.⁶⁹ “In opprobrium magnum mulier remanserat; quia ab initio per mulierem peccatum, et propter hanc omnes morimur. Diabolus unam Evam deiecit: sed Christus natus ex virgine, multas feminas exaltavit. Perpetua et Felicitas caput calcaverunt serpentis, quod Eva ad cor suum intus admisit” (“woman remained in great disgrace; from the beginning there was the

sin of woman, and because of this we all die. The Devil threw down Eve alone; but Christ was born from a virgin and he raised up many women. Perpetua and Felicitas stepped on the head of the serpent because Eve admitted him deep into her heart”).⁷⁰

In another work, sometimes ascribed to Quodvultdeus, a heavy emphasis is laid on the maternal aspects of Perpetua and Felicitas. In this work, the *Tractatus de Natale Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*,⁷¹ the author departs from Augustine’s sermons on Perpetua and Felicitas. Augustine does mention that Felicitas was in labor and had a painful birth (Serm. 281). Likewise he says “one was a mother” (Serm. 282); this must be a reference to Perpetua since Felicitas had not yet given birth. This last point is important to Augustine: The extra burden of just having a child compounded the frailty of her sex and gave hope to the Devil that she might more easily be vanquished by him. But Augustine does not dwell in any detail on the lactating mothers. On the other hand, Quodvultdeus (if he is the author) is obsessed with the pregnant mother (Felicitas), the nubile, feverishly adolescent, and lactating Perpetua, and the details of their bodies.⁷²

First, the author examines the motives of Perpetua when she so insolently and arrogantly acted against her father and chose Christ over her natural girlish instincts. She was, Quodvultdeus says, an adolescent, in her *viridiores anni* (“fecund years”) when women tend to passionate love; she was a woman of 22 years,⁷³ a time of life when one would naturally have a greater desire for the body (*carnis*) than for divine love (*Trac. sec. 2*, Morin). Furthermore, she had another stroke against her: A baby son hung from her breasts (“the heavy burden of maternal anxiety clung to her bosom”). It was, Quodvultdeus says, the grace of Christ (*Christi gratia*) that helped her to overcome these obstacles to her faith. Quodvultdeus turns to Felicitas, *gravida comprehensa, gravida inclusa est* (*Trac. sec. 3*, Morin). She was weighed down by her burden of child when she was arrested and jailed; her womb was in its eight month. By her prayers she was helped to deliver the baby safely in time for her martyrdom.

Quodvultdeus then quotes Matthew 24:19: *vae praegnantibus et lactantibus in illis diebus* (in Matthew this is a warning about the end of days and what people must do when it comes: “alas for women with child in those days, and for those who have children at the breast!”). But Quodvultdeus uses this biblical warning as a jumping-off point for a disquisition on how lactation and pregnancy brought to Perpetua and

Felicitas not catastrophe or *miseriam* but “perpetual felicity” (*perpetua felicitas*) and *gloriam* (*Trac. sec. 4, Morin*). Quodvultdeus jumps now into a grotesque metaphorical interpretation of these maternal conditions: it was the “minds that were pregnant with the hope of this time” (*spe huius saeculi praegnantes mentes*) and “lactating with the happiness of this time” (*laetitia huius saeculi lactantes*). Felicitas and Perpetua were not therefore the lactating and pregnant women who were warned in the Bible; their “conception” and “birth” were of a different, spiritual sort, *beatum* (“blessed”) (*Trac. sec. 4, Morin*). These two women, “inflamed by the love of Christ,” were able to overcome the Devil, deflecting and resisting all pleasures and temptations of this world: parental affection, the bond with their children, their womanly weakness, a pregnant womb, a perilous birth (*Trac. sec. 6, Morin*).

So, like Augustine, Quodvultdeus praises these women because they overcame womanly weakness and so many other circumstances and bodily functions associated with women to achieve their final goal: union with Christ through martyrdom. As Shaw comments, “there is a monotonous sameness” to the reactions of the men (editors, church fathers) who comment on or rewrite Perpetua’s story, and this numbingly similar set of reactions come not from any copying of texts but from “a sameness in their perception of the problem.”⁷⁴

Notker

A later commentator on Perpetua’s martyrdom continues in the tradition of misreading (or rereading) Perpetua and deserves our notice: the ninth-century poet Notker of St. Gall.⁷⁵ In Notker’s hymn or sequence, *In Natale Sanctarum Feminarum* (“For the Festival of Holy Women”), he adopts many of the salient features of Perpetua’s story in a retelling of previous stories to shape his listeners’ memory. He makes special use of Perpetua’s visions (in particular the first and fourth visions, which Notker collapses) in his hymn (I quote the beginning stanzas here):

1. Scalam ad caelos subrectam
tormentis cinctam—

2. Cuius ima draco servare
Cautus invigilat iugiter,

3. Ne quis eius vel primum gradum
possit insaucius scandere

4. Cuius ascensus extracto
Aethiops gladio
Vetat exitium minitans,

6. Hanc ergo scalam ita Christi
Amor feminis fecit perviam
Ut dracone conculcato
Et Aethiopis gladio transito

8. Quid tibi profecit
Profane serpens
Quondam unam
Decepisse mulierem

5. Cuius supremis innixus
iuvenis splendidus
ramum aureolum retinet—

7. Per omne genus tormentorum
caeli apicem queant capere
et de manu confortantis
regis auream lauream sumere.

9. Cum virgo pepererit
incarnatum
Dei patris
unicum dominum Jesum?

1. A ladder stretching up to heaven,
Circled by torments—

2. At whose foot an attentive dragon
Stands on guard, forever awake,

4. The ascent of the ladder barred
By an Ethiop, brandishing
A drawn sword, threatening death

6. This is the ladder the love of Christ
Made so free for women
That, treading down the dragon
And striding past the Ethiop's sword,

8. What good did it do you,
Impious serpent,
Once to have deceived a woman

3. So that no one can climb even
to the first rung and not be torn—

5. While over the topmost rung
leans a young man, radiant,
a golden bough in his hand —

7. By way of torments of every kind
they can reach heaven's summit
and take the golden laurel
from the hand of the strength-giving
king.

9. Since a virgin brought forth
God incarnate,
only-begotten son of the Father⁷⁶

Here, in a figural poem representing a ladder, Notker incorporates the image of the ladder of torment (vision one, *Passio* 4), the dragon at the bottom (vision one, *Passio* 4), the threatening figure of the “Ethiop” (= Egyptian in vision four, *Passio* 10), the branch offered by the divine-like figure (vision 4, *Passio* 10, although there it was a green branch with golden apples offered); the male figure who greets her at the top of the ladder (vision one, *Passio* 4; there it is a tall, gray-haired man who gives Perpetua curds to eat; in Notker, she is met by a splendid youth who holds a golden branch—the branch of Perpetua’s fight in *Passio* 10—and the comforting king who holds the golden laurel). Notker conflates all the events that Perpetua encounters in her first vision, on her trip up the

ladder to heaven, and her fourth vision, in her battle against the Egyptian (a figure of the Devil), and he melds them together into the first four stanzas, using the images to advance his major theme of women's ascent into heaven. In Notker's time, the audience would not necessarily have known about and identified the references to Perpetua's *Passio* since this work was given little notice in the early medieval period, but many of the images and details found in Notker were also familiar from the Bible (the ladder, the snake, the Satan figure) and so could have been understood by Notker's audience from that context.⁷⁷

The last sections of Notker's sequence depart from Perpetua and launch into a description of how women have achieved their entrance to heaven despite their descent from Eve:

10. Qui praedam tibi tulit et
Armilla maxillam forat,

12. Nunc ergo temet virgines
Vincere cernis, invade

14. Et viduarum
Maritis fidem
Nunc ingemis integram,

16. Feminas nunc vides in bello
Contra te facto duces existere

18. Quin et tua vasa
Meretrices dominus emundat

20. Pro his nunc beneficiis
In commune dominum
Nos glorificemus
Et peccatores et iusti,

11. ut egressus Evae natis
fiat, quos tenere cupis.

13. Et maritatas parere
filios deo placitos,

15. Qui creatori
fidem negare
persuaseras virgini.

17. Quae filios suos instigant
fortiter tua tormenta vincere.

19. Et haec sibi templum
dignatur efficere purgatum

21. Qui et stantes corroborat
et prolapsis dexteram
porrigit, ut saltem
post facinora surgamus.

10. He who took your spoils away

And pierces your jaw with a hook

12. Now therefore, envious one,
You see girls defeating you

14. Now you groan at the fidelity
Of widows to their husbands

16. Now you see women who are
leaders
In the war waged against you

11. So that a way out would be created
for the children of Eve
whom you desire to hold

13. And married women bearing
sons who please God.

15. you who persuaded a maiden to
deny faith to her creator.

17. women who spur on their sons

to bravely overcome all your tortures

18. Even courtesans, your vessels,
God purifies

20. For these graces now let us
Glorify God together
Both sinners and the just

19. and he deigns to make them a temple
purified for himself

21. He who strengthens those who stand
and offers his right hand to those
who have fallen so that at least
we might rise up after our evil deeds.

Here Notker, in keeping with the religious reforms in the ninth-century Carolingian empire, radically restricts the acceptable roles and behaviors of women and narrows the steps they can take to reach holiness.⁷⁸ Women who try to reach a holy state must rid themselves of Eve and aspire to become Mary. They can be virgins, or faithful widows, or mothers who give over their sons to God and dedicate them to fighting evil Satan, or courtesans (*meretrices*) who have been cleansed by God and turned into temples to God. These women are defined by the men in their lives and by self-abnegation.

How does Perpetua fit into this picture? Not easily. Notker has stripped her of all the gender ambiguity present in the original *Passio* (see Chapter 2) and excluded the category of the strong, independent woman who gives up her husband, father, and baby son in order to become a Christian and a martyr. Instead, Notker follows Augustine's lead in emphasizing her roles as wife and mother, roles that Perpetua herself either does not refer to at all (wife) or rejects (mother). As Cotter-Lynch maintains, "the third-century text radically undermines conceptual models predicated upon clear gender difference and strongly resists the type of reading radically imposed upon it by Notker and others (including Saint Augustine)." ⁷⁹ So Notker revises the gender nuances of Perpetua's original text and re-creates the strict gender hierarchy we find in so many of the later readers of her text. He uses the *Passio Perpetuae* but seems to be giving us its antithesis.⁸⁰ Notker's Perpetua is doing different work than the Perpetua of the original *Passio*; the earlier Perpetua reflects an incipient stage of the Christian church in which gender distinctions had not yet been fully hierarchized and calls into question how useful or workable these gender dichotomies were.

Thus Notker fashions a Perpetua after his own image of the holy woman, and he does this by carefully selecting some elements of her narrative and omitting others. Augustine had also participated in this rewriting, but, unlike Notker, he includes the more disturbing parts (for

example, Perpetua's becoming male in *Passio* 10 or the lactating and pregnant mother) and tries to explain them away. Notker tends to concentrate his rewriting of Perpetua on her role as a holy woman who works through God's divine agency.

Jacob de Voragine

The popularity of Jacob de Voragine's *Golden Legend* (*Legenda Aurea*), written between 1260 and 1266, is evident from the number of manuscripts that remain (over 800), the many printings of it in book form between 1470 and 1530, and the fact that it was popular until the fifteenth century and was translated into most of the Western European vernacular languages that then existed.⁸¹ Jacob relies on many sources, but his two major debts are to Bartholomew of Trent and Jean de Mailly (see previous discussion). Jean de Mailly's *Abbreviatio in Gestis et Miraculis Sanctorum* draws heavily from the portrait of Perpetua found in the *Acta* and in Augustine (while Bartholomew takes some of his details from the *Passio*), and Jacob adopts this version, showing us a Perpetua who is less an individual whose presence shines through her actions than just one example of a Christian rejecting her natal family for a new Christian family, someone to be admired but not imitated. She represents feminine sanctity in a way that avoids the gender complications and nuances we find in the *Passio* itself. Interestingly, Jacob moves Perpetua and Felicitas from their usual feast day on March 7 to November 27, the feast day of St. Saturninus of Toulouse, for whom they become an appendage.⁸² In this version of the story, only Perpetua's first vision is given (in shorter form) and her gladiatorial fight is omitted. Perpetua and her group are portrayed in fierce opposition to their families; Perpetua rejects her parents, husband, and son, calling them enemies of God. We see little of the very human devotion to her father or her son that tears her apart in the *Passio*. We also do not see the agency given to or shown by Perpetua in the *Passio*; in Jacob's version, the agency comes from the divine. Perpetua becomes, in Jacob's telling of her story, a standardized and idealized figure of a virgin martyr, who lacks the gender ambiguities that draw us into her story and the fierce self-confidence and boldness that make readers want to imitate and understand her.

Conclusion

Male authors from Perpetua's own time onward have shaped her tale and her subjectivity. "What chance was there," Brent Shaw asks, "for any Perpetua to tell her story?"⁸³ Perpetua would hardly recognize herself in any of the later representations and refigurings of herself and her tale.⁸⁴ Even in the *Passio*, which was likely written a short time after her martyrdom, Perpetua has been revised by her editor/narrator. Farrell, commenting on Augustine's "canonization of Perpetua," says that the *Passio* invites the kind of insinuations that Augustine makes about its purported authorship (i.e., that it might not be by Perpetua), since it is surrounded by an interpretive frame that seems to be every bit as tendentious as that of later interpreters like Augustine.⁸⁵ And Shaw pines for the "small and fragile thing" that was the original *Passio* of Perpetua, which, however, "from the start . . . was buried under an avalanche of male interpretations, rereadings, and distortions."⁸⁶

For a long while, Perpetua (the woman and the text) was the product of male commentators, editors, and sermonizers. This subversive woman and her text were absorbed into a masculine, dominant discourse and changed beyond recognition. The narrator of the *Passio* makes her into the *matrona Christi, Dei delicata* ("the wife of Christ, the *delicata* of God", *Passio* 18.2) and later a *puellam delicatam* (20.2). Some people translate *delicata* as "darling," "favorite," "beautiful," but *delicata* usually has an erotic sense, as with its predecessor in earlier Latin, *deliciae*, used often of pet slaves kept for sexual purposes.⁸⁷ At the opposite pole, Augustine transforms her into a *virgo casta* (Serm. 281.1), a woman shorn of womanly weakness. So, as Sigismund-Nielsen says, "both the narrator of the *Passio* and Augustine had to change her in order to make this extraordinary Roman woman fit into their Christian framework. One made Perpetua a whore, the other a virgin. Both reflect the perfervid contempt in which the early Church held women."⁸⁸

More recently, feminist scholars of early Christianity have tried to find new ways of uncovering "the voice of the victim."⁸⁹ Cooper finds an access in the *Passio* to the "vivid, bold, and unapologetic voice of the martyr herself," a woman who understands well that her own voice will be out of her control after her death.⁹⁰ It is not the case that all women scholars speak with the same voice (any more than all male scholars do), but rather that they are far more reluctant to appropriate Perpetua

as male scholars and church fathers in the past have done. Scholars like Bal, Burrus, Cameron, Castelli, Clark, Cooper, Kraemer, Perkins, and Tilley have given us a whole new Perpetua to consider. As Cameron says, “the rhetoric of the early church was a male rhetoric, and it is only recently that readings of it have also not been male readings. Thus the entire debate about the ‘position of women in the early church’ has taken place, and still must take place, within a framework of male textuality . . . there was no simple way in which the Fathers of the fourth century could write about women.”⁹¹

Virginia Burrus gives us one of the more interesting accounts of the “torturable female body.”⁹² For Burrus, Perpetua is evidence of a “new” Christian subjectivity, an identity in which gender had become more malleable and much less easy to define, although still necessary as a category of definition.⁹³ Perpetua can be—and has been—seen as a figure of feminized virility or virilized femininity, someone who can be an ambivalent figure with whom female readers can identify or an object of male voyeurism.⁹⁴ She is a site of continual contestation.⁹⁵

Coda

Maureen Tilley ends her study of the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* with a section titled “Twisting the Tradition.”⁹⁶ There she points out that Perpetua and Felicitas were “liturgically rendered virgins” by the thirteenth century. Much later their feast day was moved from March 7 to March 6 to make way for a male saint. Finally, under Vatican II, they reclaimed March 7 as their own, and their status was no longer said to be “virgins,” “a gesture to the historical bodiliness of these mothers” (852). The voice of Perpetua continues to be strong and clear despite the processes of reinterpretation, misinterpretation, resubjugation, and victimization that she has undergone.

APPENDIX

Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis

- 1.1 If ancient examples of faith that bear witness to the grace of God and serve the edification of humankind have for this purpose been set forth in writing so that by reading them aloud, which, so to speak, makes them visibly present, God may be glorified and man strengthened, why should not even new examples also be set forth that are equally suitable for both purposes?
- 1.2 For even in the same way will these examples at some time be ancient and useful for our descendants if in their own present time they are considered of less authority because of the prejudiced veneration of antiquity.
- 1.3 But let this be the concern of those who would judge the one power of the one Holy Spirit in proportion to the span of times, whereas all the later events—because they are later—should be regarded as more important in accordance with the increase of grace that has been decided for the last span of earthly time.
- 1.4 For in the last days, says the Lord, I will pour forth from my spirit upon all flesh, and their sons and daughters will prophesy; and I will pour forth from my spirit over my servants and my handmaids, and young men will see visions, and old men will dream dreams.
- 1.5 And so we too who both acknowledge as valid and honor prophecies and the recent visions promised and who reckon all the other powers of the Holy Spirit as at the service of the church—to which also the same Holy Spirit was sent to distribute gifts to everyone (just as God distributes to each person)—we must of necessity both write down these things and make them known for the glory of God by reading it to you so that none of those who are weak or despairing in the faith may think that the grace of God was associated with only the ancients whether in granting the honor of martyrdom or of revelations, since God always carries out what he has promised as a proof for non-believers and as a benefit for those who believe.
- 1.6 And so, brothers and sons, we declare to you what we have heard and felt so that both you who were present might call to mind the glory of God and you who now know by hearing it read might have communion with holy martyrs and, through them, with our Lord Jesus Christ to whom is glory and honor forever and ever.

- 2.1 Taken into custody were young catechumens: Revocatus and Felicitas, his fellow servant in Christ, Saturninus, and Secundulus. Amidst these was Vibia Perpetua, well-born, educated in the manner of a free person, and married in a respectable fashion.
- 2.2 Perpetua had a father, mother, and two brothers, one of them also a catechumen, and an infant son at the breast.
- 2.3 She herself was in her twenty-first year. From this point on, she herself has recounted the complete account of her martyrdom written in her own hand and reflecting her own thoughts and ideas.
- 3.1 This is what she said: When we were still with our guards under house arrest and my father was eager, because of his affection for me, to wrestle me away from my faith by his words, and he kept trying to break my resolve: "Father," I said, "do you see—as an example—this vessel lying here, a pitcher or whatever it is?" He said, "Yes, I see it."
- 3.2 And I said to him, "So it can't be called by another name than what it is, can it?" And he said, "No." "And so, in the same way, I can't say that I am anything else except what I am: a Christian."
- 3.3 Then my father, angered by this word, threw himself at me as if to pluck my eyes out, but he only shook me and departed, defeated, along with his devil's arguments.
- 3.4 Then when I was without my father for a few days, I gave thanks to the Lord, and I was refreshed by his absence.
- 3.5 In this same space of a few days, we were baptized, and the Holy Spirit told me that I should ask for nothing else from the baptismal waters than endurance of the flesh. After a few days, we were put into prison; I was terrified since I had never experienced such darkness.
- 3.6 What a terrible day! The heat was intense because of the crowding, and the soldiers extorted money. And above all I was tormented by anxiety for my baby.
- 3.7 Then Tertius and Pomponius, the blessed deacons who were caring for our needs, arranged with a bribe that we should be sent into a better area of the prison for a few hours and find some relief.
- 3.8 Then all of us left the dungeon, and were free to be by ourselves. I was nursing my baby who was by then weak from hunger. Worried for him, I spoke to my mother and tried to comfort my brother, and I entrusted my child to them. I was deeply sorrowful because I saw how sorrowful they were for me.
- 3.9 Such were the cares that I suffered for several days. I was given permission for my son to stay with me in prison. And immediately I recovered, and I was relieved of the strain and anxiety for my child. Suddenly the prison became a palace for me so that I preferred to be there rather than anywhere else.
- 4.1 Then my brother said to me: My lady sister, you are held in such high regard now that you could request a vision and you will be shown whether you will suffer martyrdom or release.
- 4.2 And I, because I knew that I could converse with the Lord, whose great blessings I had experienced, promised my brother confidently and said to him, "Tomorrow I will report to you." And I asked for a vision and this vision was revealed to me.
- 4.3 I see a bronze ladder of great height that reached all the way up to heaven, and it was narrow so that only one person at a time could go up. Onto the sides of the ladder were stuck all manner of iron implements and weapons: swords, lances,

- hooks, executioners' swords, and spikes. So, those who should climb up without taking care or looking up would be torn to pieces and mangled, and their flesh would cling to these weapons.
- 4.4 And under the ladder lay a serpent of huge size who ambushed those going up and scared them so they would not ascend.
- 4.5 Nevertheless Saturus ascended first—he had turned himself in later voluntarily for our sakes because he was the one who had instructed us, so he was not there when we were arrested.
- 4.6 He reached the top of the ladder, and he turned back and said to me, “Perpetua, I am waiting for you. But be careful that the serpent doesn’t bite you.” And I said, “It will not harm me, in the name of Jesus Christ.”
- 4.7 And the serpent, as if it was afraid of me, slowly stuck his head out from under the ladder. And I, as if I were stepping on the first rung of the ladder, stepped on his head and went up the ladder.
- 4.8 I saw there a huge garden and a man, sitting in the middle, who was gray-haired and dressed like a shepherd, tall, milking his sheep. Standing around him were many thousands of people, all dressed in white.
- 4.9 And this man raised his head, looked at me, and said, “Welcome, child.” He called me over to him and gave me a small morsel from the cheese curd he was making from milk. I took it in my cupped hands and I ate it. All the people standing around said “Amen.”
- 4.10 At the sound of that word, I woke up, still tasting something sweet. I immediately told my brother. And we understood that we were facing martyrdom, and we began then to have no more hope for this world.
- 5.1 After a few days, a rumor spread around that we would be given a hearing. Then my father arrived from the city, overcome with exhaustion and anxiety. He came up to the prison to visit me so that he could wrestle me away from my faith and he said,
- 5.2 “My daughter, have pity on my gray hair; have pity on me, your father—if I am worthy to be called father by you. If I have raised you with these hands to this prime of your life, if I have favored you before your brothers, don’t disgrace me in front of everyone.
- 5.3 Think about your brothers, your mother and your aunt; think about your son who will not be able to live on after you die.
- 5.4 Stop being stubborn and proud! Don’t destroy us all! No one of us will be able to speak freely if you undergo this torment.”
- 5.5 These were the things he kept saying to me just like a devoted father would, kissing my hands and throwing himself at my feet; lamenting, he called me not “daughter” but “Lady.”
- 5.6 I was sorry for my father’s wretchedness; only he of all my family would not be rejoicing in my martyrdom. I said these words of comfort, “whatever happens at this tribunal, will be what God wishes. You should know that we are not in our own power but in God’s power.” Then he left me, completely grief-stricken.
- 6.1 The next day when we were eating lunch, suddenly we were taken away to be tried. We came to the forum. A rumor quickly spread around the areas near the forum, and an immense crowd gathered.
- 6.2 We climbed up on the platform. The other prisoners were questioned and confessed that they were Christians. Then they came to me. Suddenly my father appeared with my son and pulled me down from the steps saying to me, “Perform the sacrifice! Pity your child!”

- 6.3 And Hilarianus, the procurator, who had assumed the powers of life and death in that office when the proconsul Minicius Opimianus died, said to me, “spare your father’s gray head, spare your infant son. Make a sacrifice for the health of the emperors.”
- 6.4 I answered, “No, I will not sacrifice.” Hilarianus said, “Are you a Christian?” I responded, “Yes, I am a Christian.”
- 6.5 When my father kept standing there trying to shake my resolve, Hilarianus ordered him to be knocked down and beaten with a rod. My father’s pain hurt me as much as if I myself had been beaten and so I grieved for this wretched old man.
- 6.6 Then Hilarianus pronounced sentence on all of us and condemned us to the beasts. With cheer we returned to the jail.
- 6.7 Because my child had been accustomed to being fed at my breasts and staying with me in the prison, I at once sent the deacon Pomponius to my father to ask for the baby. But my father would not hand him over.
- 6.8 By God’s will, the baby no longer desired to breastfeed nor did my breasts become inflamed. So I was not tormented either by anxiety for my child nor by pain in my breasts.
- 7.1 After a few days, while we were all praying, suddenly in the midst of the prayer I called out the name “Dinocrates.” I was astonished because he had never come to my mind until that moment. I grieved as I remembered his sad fate.
- 7.2 And I realized that I had achieved a state of grace and could petition on his behalf. I began to pray feverishly for him and to cry out to the Lord.
- 7.3 On that very night this vision was shown to me.
- 7.4 I see Dinocrates coming out of a dark place where there were also many others. He is very hot and thirsty, has on filthy clothes, and his color is pale. He has a lesion on his face, the same one he had when he died.
- 7.5 This Dinocrates had been my flesh and blood brother. He was seven years old when he died a terrible death of a facial tumor that made everyone recoil.
- 7.6 For him, then, I had prayed. But between me and him there was such a big distance that we could not approach each other.
- 7.7 There was a pool full of water where Dinocrates was; it had a rim higher than Dinocrates’ height. Dinocrates kept stretching himself up to try to drink.
- 7.8 I was saddened because, even though the pool had water, he could not drink because the rim was too high.
- 7.9 Then I awoke, and I understood that my brother was suffering. But I had faith that I would be able to help his suffering. I prayed for him every day until we were transferred to the military prison—we were moved there because we were going to fight in the military games in honor of the birthday of Geta Caesar.
- 7.10 And I prayed for Dinocrates night and day, with groans and tears that my prayers should be answered.
- 8.1 On the day we were kept in the stocks, the following vision was shown to me. I see the same place I had seen before. Dinocrates is nicely dressed, clean, and refreshing himself. And where the lesion had been, now I see a scar.
- 8.2 The pool that I had seen before has a lower rim now up to Dinocrates’ waist, and he was constantly drinking water from it.
- 8.3 Above the rim is a golden cup full of water. Dinocrates went up to it and began to drink from it. This cup never ran out of water.
- 8.4 When he had had his fill, he left the water and began to play like a joyful child.

Then I awoke. And I understood that he had been freed from his trials.

- 9.1 After a few days, Pudens, the military prison guard, who was in charge of the prison, began to hold us in honor since he understood that we had within us great power. He let many people in to visit us so that both we and they could restore each other.
- 9.2 When the day of the games drew near, my father came in to see me, overcome with exhaustion and anxiety, and he began to tear hair out of his beard and throw it on the ground. And he prostrated himself. He cursed his old age and said words that would move all of creation.
- 9.3 As for me, I grieved for his unhappiness in his aged years.
- 10.1 On the day before we were to fight in the arena, I see in a vision the following. Pomponius the deacon had come to the entrance of the prison and knocked loudly.
- 10.2 I went out to see him and opened the door for him. He was dressed in an unbelted white robe and was wearing embroidered sandals.
- 10.3 And he said to me, “Perpetua, we are waiting for you. Come.” He took my hand, and we began to walk through rough and winding places.
- 10.4 Finally we arrived, with some difficulty, at the amphitheater, out of breath. He led me into the middle of the arena and said, “Don’t be scared. I am here with you, and I will suffer with you.” Then he left.
- 10.5 I see a large crowd in keen anticipation. Because I knew that I had been condemned to fight the beasts, I was surprised that no beasts were sent out to attack me.
- 10.6 Instead there came out to fight with me an Egyptian hideous in appearance with his helpers. Handsome young men also came out to be my helpers and supporters.
- 10.7 And I was unclothed, and I became male. My supporters began to rub me down with oil, the way they do before an athletic contest. I see my opponent on the other side of the arena—the Egyptian man—rolling around in dust.
- 10.8 And there came forth a man of such great height that he was taller than the highest point of the amphitheater. He was wearing a loose robe with two stripes of purple down the middle of his chest, and embroidered sandals made of gold and silver. He was carrying a staff like a trainer of gladiators and a green branch with golden apples on it.
- 10.9 He asked for silence and said, “If this Egyptian man defeats her, he will kill her with his sword, but if she wins, she will receive this branch.”
- 10.10 Then he left. And we approached each other and began to punch each other with our fists. He kept trying to grab my feet, but I kept kicking him in the face with my heels.
- 10.11 Then I was lifted up into the air, and I began to beat him even though my feet weren’t touching the ground. When I saw there was a lull in the fighting, I interlocked my fingers and grabbed his head. He fell on his face, and I trod on his head.
- 10.12 And the crowd began to shout, and my helpers began to sing psalms. I approached the trainer and received the branch.
- 10.13 And he kissed me and said, “Daughter, peace be with you.” I began to move gloriously to the Gate of Life.

Then I awoke.

- 10.14 Then I understood that I would not be fighting with the beasts but against the devil. But I knew that victory was mine.

- 10.15 This is my account of what I did until the day before the combat. As for an account of the contest itself, he who wishes to may write it.
- 11.1 But blessed Satorius also delivered this vision of his own which he himself wrote down.
- 11.2 "We had suffered martyrdom," he said, "and we departed from the flesh." We began to be carried toward the east by four angels whose hands did not touch us.
- 11.3 And we went not turned upwards lying on our backs but as if we were climbing a gentle hill.
- 11.4 When first we were free of this world, we saw a blinding light, and I said to Perpetua, who was by my side, "This is what the Lord promised us. We have received it."
- 11.5 And while we were being carried by these four angels, a great space opened before us that was like a garden with rose bushes and all kinds of flowers.
- 11.6 The trees were as tall as cypress trees, and their leaves kept falling without stopping.
- 11.7 There in the garden were four other angels, more radiant than the others. When they saw us, they honored us and said in wonder to the other angels, "Behold, they are here! Behold, they are here!" And the four angels who were carrying us trembled in fear and set us down.
- 11.8 And on our own feet we crossed over to a park on a broad path.
- 11.9 There we found Jocundus and Saturninus and Artaxius, who had been burned alive during the same persecution, and Quintus, who was himself a martyr and had died in prison. And we asked where the others were.
- 11.10 And the angels said to us, "First come in, enter, and greet the Lord."
- 12.1 And we came near a place whose walls seemed almost to be made of light. Before the door stood four angels who, entering, put white robes on us.
- 12.2 We went in, and we heard one voice singing in unison "Holy, holy, holy, without end."
- 12.3 And we saw in the same place someone sitting who appeared to be an old man who had snowy hair but a youthful face. We did not see his feet.
- 12.4 And on his right and left side were four elders and beyond these many other elders stood.
- 12.5 Entering we stood in awe before the throne, and four angels lifted us up and we kissed him. And with his hand he touched our faces.
- 12.6 The other elders said to us, "Let us stand." And we stood and gave the kiss of peace. The elders said to us, "Go and play."
- 12.7 And I said to Perpetua, "You have what you desire." And she said to me, "Thanks be to God that, however joyful I was in the flesh, I am even happier here."
- 13.1 And we went out, and we saw before the gates the bishop Optatus on the right and the learned priest Aspasius on the left, standing apart from each other and looking sorrowful.
- 13.2 And they threw themselves at our feet and said, "Make peace between us, since you have departed from life and left us in this situation."
- 13.3 And we said to them, "Aren't you our bishop and our priest? How then can you throw yourselves at our feet?" We were moved and embraced them.
- 13.4 And Perpetua began to speak with them in Greek, and we set them apart taking them into the park and under a rose bush.
- 13.5 While we were speaking with them, the angels said to them, "Let them refresh themselves, and, if you have any disagreements between you, forgive each other."

- 13.6 And the angels disturbed them, and they said to Optatus, "Set your people straight; for they come like people returning from the races and fighting over the teams there."
- 13.7 And at this, it seemed to us that they wanted to close the gates.
- 13.8 We began to recognize many of our brethren there who were also martyrs. We were all nourished by an indescribable odor that satisfied us.
Then I awoke, rejoicing.
- 14.1 These were the most glorious visions of the blessed martyrs themselves—Saturus and Perpetua—visions that they wrote down themselves.
- 14.2 But God called Secundulus with an earlier end from this life while he was still in prison, giving him a grace through which he could avoid the wild beasts.
- 14.3 But even though his soul did not acknowledge the sword, his flesh surely did.
- 15.1 In the case of Felicity, the grace of the Lord touched her too in the following way.
- 15.2 When she was eight months pregnant (for she was pregnant when she was arrested), as the day for the games approached, she was in great distress, fearing that she might be held back from her martyrdom because of her pregnancy (since it was against the law for pregnant women to be presented for execution) and fearing that she would shed her holy and innocent blood later in the company of real criminals.
- 15.3 Her fellow martyrs were also deeply afflicted that they might have to abandon one who had been so close an ally, their fellow traveler in martyrdom, to journey alone on the path of their shared hope.
- 15.4 And so with one united lament they joined together in pouring out a prayer to God two days before the games.
- 15.5 Immediately after this prayer, her labor pains began. And when, because of the natural difficulty of a delivery in the eighth month, she was suffering with terrible labor pains, one of the prison guards said to her, "If you are in such pain as this now, what will you do when you are thrown to the beasts, those beasts that you showed contempt for when you refused to sacrifice?"
- 15.6 And she responded, "Now it is I alone who suffers; but there, in the arena, there will be another in me who will suffer on my behalf because I am going to suffer for him."
- 15.7 And she brought forth a baby girl whom a sister in Christ raised as her own daughter.
- 16.1 And so, since the Holy Spirit permitted and, by permitting, has willed that the sequence of events in the games be written down, even though unworthy to add to the description of so great a glorious deed, nevertheless I carry out the blessed Perpetua's testamentary command,—or rather her sacred trust, by adding an example of her steadfastness and exalted soul.
- 16.2 When the tribune was punishing them more severely because, due to the warnings of some foolish people, he was afraid that the martyrs might be spirited away from the prison by some magic spells, Perpetua answered him to his face,
- 16.3 "Why do you not just allow us to comfort ourselves, we who are the most noble of the condemned, indeed Caesar's own victims, and who are to fight the beasts on his birthday? Won't you gain more glory if, on that day, we are led out in better health?"
- 16.4 The tribune shuddered and became embarrassed; he then ordered the prisoners to be handled more humanely so that her brothers and the others were able

- to go in to see them and be comforted with them. By then even the warden of the prison was a believer.
- 17.1 On the day before the games, when they were having their last meal, the meal they call “free,” and they celebrated—insofar as was in their power—not a free feast but a feast of divine love (*agape*), they cast words at the people with their customary steadfastness, threatening them with God’s judgment, calling to witness their joy in their suffering, and mocking the curiosity of those who ran up to see them. Satorus said,
- 17.2 “Is tomorrow not enough for you? What pleasure do you take in looking so eagerly on that which you hate? Today you are friends, tomorrow enemies. At least look carefully on our faces so that you will recognize us on the big day.”
- 17.3 And they all began to leave, astonished, and many of them became believers.
- 18.1 The day of their victory dawned, and they marched from the prison into the amphitheater as if they were marching to heaven—cheerful, with their faces composed, and, if they trembled, it was out of joy, not fear.
- 18.2 There followed Perpetua with a radiant face and calm walk, like the bride of Christ, like the favorite of God, turning aside the gaze of all the onlookers by the force of her own.
- 18.3 And also Felicitas, rejoicing that she had safely given birth so that she might fight against the beasts, from blood to blood, from midwife to gladiator, to wash after her birth-giving in a second baptism.
- 18.4 When they had been led to the gate and were made to put on costumes, the men the robes of the priests of Saturn and the women of those priestesses consecrated to Ceres, Perpetua, noble to the end, kept on strongly resisting.
- 18.5 She said, “We have come here of our own free will for this reason: so that our freedom would not be crushed. We signed away our lives so that we would not have to do something like this. We made this agreement with you.”
- 18.6 Injustice recognized justice: the tribune yielded his ground. They were to be brought in just as they were, without costumes.
- 18.7 Perpetua sang psalms, as if already trampling on the Egyptian’s head. Revocatus and Saturninus and Satorus kept threatening the onlooking crowd.
- 18.8 Then when they came into the sight of Hilarianus, they began, with gestures and nodding their heads, to say to him: “As you condemn us, so God will condemn you.”
- 18.9 The crowd, provoked by this, demanded that they be beaten with whips by a line of beast-fighters. And then indeed they rejoiced because they had received some share of the sufferings of the Lord.
- 19.1 But he who had said “Seek, and ye shall receive” gave to those who were seeking it the end that each one desired.
- 19.2 Whenever they conversed among themselves about each one’s hope for martyrdom, Saturninus declared that he wanted to be thrown to every sort of beast, no doubt so that he might wear a more glorious crown.
- 19.3 And thus, at the beginning of the games, Saturninus and Revocatus fought with leopards, and then were also attacked on a platform by a bear.
- 19.4 Now Satorus abhorred nothing more than a bear. But he was certain that he would first be finished off by a single bite of a leopard.
- 19.5 And so, when he was being offered up as fodder to a boar, the beast-fighter who had tied him to the boar was the one who was gored by this boar, and he died a few days after the games. Satorus was only dragged around.

- 19.6 When he had been bound up on the platform to face a bear, the bear refused to come out of its cage; and so Satorus was called back unharmed for a second time.
- 20.1 For the young women, however, the devil had arranged an extremely savage cow, prepared for this occasion contrary to the usual practice, seeking to imitate their sex even with the beast.
- 20.2 And so they were led forth, stripped naked and placed in netting. The spectators were horrified, seeing one delicate young girl and the other who had just recently given birth, her breasts still dripping with milk.
- 20.3 So they were called back and dressed in loose-fitting robes. Perpetua was thrown first, and she fell on the small of her back.
- 20.4 When she sat up, she pulled the robe that had been torn away from her side to cover up her thigh, thinking more about her modesty than her pain.
- 20.5 Then she asked for a hairpin and fastened her disheveled hair; for it was not proper for a martyr to die with her hair in this state since she should not seem to be in mourning in her moment of glory.
- 20.6 Then she rose up, and, when she saw that Felicitas had been thrown down, she went up to her, gave her a hand, and raised her up. Both women stood together, side by side.
- 20.7 And now that the hard-heartedness of the people had been overcome, they were called back to the Gate of Life.
- 20.8 There Perpetua was received by a certain Rusticus, who was then a catechumen. He stayed close by her side. As if awakened from sleep (for so much had she been in the Spirit and in ecstasy up until then), she began to look around her and to everyone's amazement she said: "When will we be brought out to face that cow or whatever it is?"
- 20.9 When she had heard what had already taken place, she did not believe it until she noticed some marks of violence on her body and clothes.
- 20.10 Then she summoned her brother and that catechumen, and spoke to them saying, "Stand firm in your faith and love one another, and do not be made to lose your faith because of our suffering."
- 21.1 At another gate, Satorus also exhorted a soldier, Pudens, saying, "So then, just as I expected and predicted, so far I have not suffered the attack of any wild beast. Now you should believe with all your heart: watch as I go out there and am finished off by one bite of a leopard."
- 21.2 Immediately, at the end of the contest, he was exposed to a leopard and was drenched with so much blood from the one bite that the spectators cried out to him as he retreated, as witness to his second baptism, "Well washed, well washed!"
- 21.3 And truly he was well washed who was washed in this way.
- 21.4 Then he said to the soldier Pudens, "Farewell! Remember the faith, and remember me. Let these things not unsettle your faith but strengthen it."
- 21.5 At the same time, he asked for the ring from Pudens' finger, and he returned it, dipped in his wound, to Pudens for a memorial, leaving it to him as a pledge and reminder of the blood he had shed.
- 21.6 Then he was laid out on the ground, nearly lifeless, in the usual place with the others to have their throats cut.
- 21.7 And when the spectators demanded that they be brought back into the middle of the arena so that their eyes might be accomplices to the sword as it penetrated their bodies, the martyrs got up of their own accord and brought themselves to

the place where the people wished them to go. They had already kissed each other so that they could carry out their martyrdom with the rituals of peace.

- 21.8 The rest of them took the sword unmoving and in silence, especially Saturus, who was the first to ascend to heaven and to release his spirit; for he was now waiting again for Perpetua.
- 21.9 But Perpetua, so that she might taste some pain, cried out as she was pierced to the bone. And she herself guided the trembling hand of the inexperienced gladiator to her own throat.
- 21.10 Perhaps so great a woman—one who was feared by an unclean spirit—could not have been killed in any other way, unless she herself had willed it.
- 21.11 O most brave and blessed martyrs! O truly called and chosen for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ! Anyone who magnifies and honors and adores this glory especially should read these testaments of our time, which are no less important for the edification of the church than the older testaments, so that new acts of bravery too might affirm that the one and same Holy Spirit is still at work even up to now and also the all-powerful God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, whose glory and unending power are everlasting. Amen.

Notes

Introduction

1. So Formisano: “There is something in this text that the reader cannot entirely grasp: the more one approaches it, the more one is unsatisfied with possible interpretations” (Bremmer and Formisano 2012b: 329). For a good summary of the various positions, see Bremmer and Formisano 2012a: 1–13. Each set of debates will be laid out in the chapters of my book.

2. Shaw 2011: 589–90.

3. Shaw 2004/1993: 322. Shaw goes on to lament that later (male) authors and critics did not leave this “exiguous voice” alone but buried it/her under an “avalanche of male interpretations, rereadings, and distortions” (p. 322).

4. Perkins 2009a: 160. Perkins refers to debates over “the centrality of the female body and human birth processes,” which she believes may have influenced the emphasis on lactation and birth in Perpetua and Felicitas. See also Kraemer, who does not believe (although she did earlier) that Perpetua wrote any part of the *Passio* and calls the *Passio* a “literary production” and a “deliberate construction of an exemplary female martyr” (2004: 5–6, 356–7; quotes from p. 6).

5. Dronke 1984: 1.

6. See here Cooper’s remarks on how “the image of the death of a young woman (both recent and ancient martyrs) bears within it such evocative power that it is peculiarly vulnerable not only to contesting voices who wish to annex its power, but also to a kind of rhetorical outward spiral, gathering significance as it attracts to itself concerns beyond its point of origin” (1998: 147).

7. Moss 2013.

8. Moss 2013: 260.

9. Moss 2013: 261.

10. See the recent edited volume by Bremmer and Formisano, which includes many essays that treat the *Passio* as a literary and not a historical document (Bremmer and Formisano 2012b). See in particular Formisano 2012: 329–47.

11. See Halporn 1991, especially 223–4; Farrell 2012: 300–20. Farrell comments on the marginal position that the *Passio* holds so that those who try to fit it into one or another silo (e.g., women’s literature, heterodox theological tract) fail to discover its true

meaning (320). Halporn says, “It is clear that texts like these are not to be evaluated in the same terms as standard literary texts” (1991: 230).

12. Halporn says (rightly, I believe) that the significance of both the *Passio* and the *Acta* “derives from the actual events to which they testify” (1991: 234).

13. Only Tertullian (*De anima* 55.4) and Augustine (Serm. 280–2) mention Perpetua and her story.

14. Ronsse 2006: 285 and n. 6.

15. Ronsse 2006: 285. Ronsse cites the work of Musurillo, who says that the multivalence of such texts was “an explicit goal of early Christian thinkers and writers” (Ronsse 2006: 305, n. 60, citing H. Musurillo, “History and Symbol: A Study of Form in Early Christian Literature,” *Theological Studies* 18.3 [1957]: 357–86). Musurillo says, for example, “All through the narrative (of the *De catechizandis rudibus*), Augustine teaches, the catechist must attend not only to the *litterae*, but also to the *mysteria*, that is, to the *allegoria* underlying the religious history” (372). See also, for an interesting meditation on an historical event and its interpretation in language, Mesnard (2012: 321–8) who says, “objective information is not enough to account for an event” (327).

16. Bradley 2003: 167, 171. Bradley discusses the deleterious effects of “the terrible collision between traditional and nontraditional systems of family ethics to which Christian beliefs, fortified by a human recalcitrance born of what can only be called fanaticism, gave rise” (166–7). These effects include extreme self-interest, lack of thought for family and community, and child abandonment. Bradley concludes by saying, “A greater perversion of nature it is difficult to imagine” (172).

17. Bradley 2003: 171.

18. Miller 1994: 148–83; Bremmer 2002: 95–7 (quote from p. 97). Bremmer thinks that Miller has substituted for “the premises of the past” the “prison of the present” (95), and he finds that the results of her analysis “hardly rise above the level of fairly banal feminism and Freudianism” (96).

Chapter 1

1. On the prologue of the *Passio* as a whole and on this particular point, see den Boeft 2012: 169–79, especially 176–8, and the bibliography cited there. I owe a few points of my translation here to den Boeft’s careful commentary on this passage.

2. den Boeft 2012: 178; Gonzalez 2014: 11–12; Kitzler 2015: 57–8.

3. The standard Latin text does not mention the place of the arrest (although three of the manuscripts do; see Heffernan 2012: 137–8, 148). The Greek text does mention it: Thuburbo Minus. Farrell and Williams in their translation chose to insert the name (2012: 15).

4. For discussion of the date assigned to the events described in the *Passio*, see Robinson 1891: 17, 22–6; Monceaux 1963: 71–2; van Beek 1936: 162*–163*; Leclercq 1939: cols. 420–1; Shaw 2004/1993: 286; Bremmer and Formisano 2012a: 2; Heffernan 2012: 60–7; Gonzalez 2014: 18–19; Kitzler 2015: 14–17. Heffernan agrees with the traditional date of the Nones of March 203 for the enactment of the martyrdom, but he proposes the fall of 209 for the completion of the editor’s version of the *Passio* (68, 78).

5. See Robinson 1891: 25, n. 3. Geta’s name survives in only one manuscript (codex Casinensis = A) and there it is spelled Ceta. See also Heffernan 2012: 68–78, who points

out that the allusion in *Passio* 7.9 to Geta Caesar has to have been written before 209, because early in that year Geta was given the name Augustus (73–7). Heffernan also proposes that the reference to Geta in 7.9 might well have been added by the editor and not written by Perpetua (75–7).

6. On Geta's death, see Barnes 1968b: 525; he puts the death in February 211. But most others put it later in that year, in December 211 (see Heffernan 2012: 86).

7. See on Tertullian's *De anima*, Waszink 1947: 5*–6* (for the dating); Barnes 1971: 34, 55; Frend 1974: 75, who seems to suggest that the *De anima* was a work of Tertullian's maturity; Bastiaensen 1982; Braun 1992: 287 and n. 1; Heffernan 2012: 66–7, 307–8. Tertullian attributes to Perpetua in this passage a dream that is actually part of Saturus' vision in *Passio* 13. Perpetua, however, is also present in this vision, and so Tertullian might have wrongly assigned this scene of Paradise to her instead of to Saturus. Braun says that either Tertullian made a wrong attribution or that he was perhaps referring to Perpetua's vision in *Passio* 4.8 and not Saturus' vision in 13.8, a view shared by Bastiaensen. If so, it is odd that Tertullian says that this happened “shortly before the day of her martyrdom” (*sub die passionis*). But on this see Bastiaensen 1982: 794, n. 14, where he argues that in Tertullian's mind, Perpetua's death was drawing near.

8. For an argument that Tertullian was, or probably was, the editor of the *Passio*, see Robinson 1891: 47–58; van Beek 1936: 92*–96*.

9. For Tertullian's life and works, see Barnes 1971 (and his 1984 postscript, 321–35). Barnes reevaluates much of the evidence that has come to us from Jerome; most of what Jerome says is unverifiable and probably untrue. See also Waszink 1947; René Braun, *Deus Christianorum. Recherches sur le vocabulaire doctrinal de Tertullien*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1977).

10. On Tertullian and Montanism, see Wilhite 2017: 87–9 and 112–14. Although Wilhite downplays the influence of Montanism at least in Tertullian and Perpetua's times, he says that making comparisons between North African Christianity and its “Phrygian contemporaries” is helpful in our understanding of prophecy and visions in the third century (88).

11. For a good review of where the term “Montanism” originated in the discussion of Christianity in this period and of those scholars who have either defended the *Passio* as Montanist or rejected that idea, see Gonzalez 2014: 22–5. Gonzalez himself finds the arguments for Montanist influence on the *Passio* “weak at best” (25) and says that the whole question is anachronistic because the distinctions had not (at least by this time) been made between more orthodox Christianity and Montanist tendencies. See also Kitzler 2015, who points out that to label the *Passio* as heterodox or heretical because it contains Montanist elements “bears little resemblance to the realities of the early Christian world of the time”; he concludes that “we can put this issue to rest by stating what again appears to be the current *communis opinio*: as a whole, the *Passio Perpetuae* is not a Montanist document” (34). For other sources, see Marksches (who argues that the Montanism in the *Passio* does not conform to the known elements of Phrygian Montanism and suggests that we view the elements usually regarded as Montanist as “slight allusions to central elements of the theology of Tertullian's house church, which were presented as given by the Holy Spirit” (2012: 290); Binder (who argues that Tertullian was an independent thinker who ultimately “created his own kind of Montanism”; 2012: 58). Butler, on the other hand, argues for the Montanist nature of the *Passio*, pointing to the many elements of the Montanist movement that are displayed in the *Passio*, and he calls the *Passio* a “thoroughly Montanist document” (2014: 177).

12. Tert. *Apol.* 1.6.3; *An.* 43, 51; *Ieiun.* 10. See Ameling 2012: 78–102, especially p. 100, for a chart of words used by both Perpetua and Tertullian. See Robinson 1891: 47–58 for an extensive examination of the question of authorship.

13. See Bremmer 2002: 82 and n. 24; Braun 1992: 287–99; Bremmer and Formisano 2012a: 5. Shaw (2004/1993: 309, n. 70) leaves the question unanswered. den Boeft (2012: 176) cites several significant parallels between the language of and references in the *Passio* and similar language and references in Tertullian (e.g., references to Joel and acts in *Passio* 1 and in Tert. *Adv. Marc.* 5.4.2, 4; 5.8.6; 5.11.4; 5.17.4). While he concedes that the assumption that Tertullian was the narrator/editor “has wellnigh disappeared,” he thinks that this editor must have belonged to a circle around Tertullian, an assumption shared by others recently (Bremmer and Formisano 2012a: 5; Ameling 2012: 80). See also Tilley (1994: 832–4), who surveys the evidence and concludes that the editor was not Tertullian. See for a summary of the different positions on the date of the text and the identity of the editor, Gonzalez 2014: 18–22 (he rejects the idea that Tertullian was the editor, 21); Kitzler 2015: 17–23.

14. See Ameling 2012: 80 and n. 11; den Boeft 2012: 176.

15. Kraemer and Lander 2000: 1054–5. They cite a story of a forged text from Tertullian (*De bapt.* 17.5) and similar assertions in letters of Paul that are thought to be by other writers. See Ehrman 2013: 502–4; in this book on forgeries, he argues that the *Passio* is not a diary but a work written by a later author that claims to be autobiographical.

16. See Shaw 2004/1993: 309, who understands the *Passio* to record Perpetua’s experiences, which have been bracketed by an editor who represents “the formal male-dominated church.” This editing was done fairly soon after the event, in Shaw’s opinion (309, n. 69).

17. Heffernan 1995: 322–3.

18. Heffernan 1995: 324. Heffernan (322–3) questions the many insertions of phrases that indicate the passage of time (“after a few days,” 5.1, 7.1) and says that these must have been added later and that therefore this text could not be a “diary” as has sometimes been claimed (since a diary would be written in the present tense). See also Bremmer and Formisano 2012a: 5–6, who believe that Perpetua could have written her narrative in prison; Bremmer 2002: 83–5; Habermehl 2004: 267–75; Marksches 2012: 277–8.

19. Shewring 1928: 56 (“rehandling”); 1931a: 19–22 (“amétrique,” 19).

20. Fridh 1968: 15–30. Fridh concludes by saying that it is extremely unlikely that Tertullian could have been the editor, given the evidence of the use of metrical *clausulae* in the *Passio* (p. 30). It is also improbable that the same editor wrote all three sections of the *Passio*. See den Boeft 2012: 176.

21. See on this Amat 1996: 70ff.; Amat 1999: 301–7; Fontaine 1968: 88ff. For a good discussion of what “African Latin” might have looked like, see Mattiacci 2014, who cites various opinions about this (and cautions that there was not just one type of African Latin).

22. For example, *deicere* ([to wrestle away from], 3.1, 5.1, 6.5), used metaphorically although it is a term borrowed from wrestling; *refrigerare* ([to be refreshed], 3.4, 3.7, 8.1, 9.1).

23. Amat 1996: 71 (simple); Dronke 1984: 16–17. Dronke cites Auerbach’s work, *Literary Language and Its Public* here, crediting Auerbach with seeing “in Perpetua’s writing the heights of which the ‘lowly style (*sermo humilis*)’ was capable in the early Christian period,” but he takes Auerbach to task for his treatment of Augustine, who, Dronke claims, observed no aesthetic distinction between Perpetua’s sections of the *Passio* and the editor’s frame. Nor did Augustine favor the lowly style or see the style

of Scripture as “*humilis* throughout” (16). See Auerbach 1965: 60ff., where he discusses the “new kind of realistic narrative fostered by the spread of Christianity.” Auerbach (1965: 63) calls Perpetua’s language “almost childlike.” Dodds differentiates her “simple” style from the “rhetorical cleverness of the redactor” (1965: 49–50).

24. Mesnard calls her style “litanical,” citing repetitions and “flat superlatives” that reduce “the effects of artifice and towering rhetoric” (2012: 323).

25. For example, *matrem tuam et materteram* (5.3). See den Boeft and Bremmer (1982: 388), who comment on Perpetua’s father’s speech in *Passio* 5 (which includes the words *matrem tuam et materteram*). They find in this speech imploring Perpetua many classical prayer formulae. Amat (1996: 72) says that some of the most highly rhetorical parts of Perpetua’s section come in her father’s speeches to her (5.2–4) and reflect judicial language. See Amat 1999: 301–7; Amat cites Monceaux, who calls the style of parts of the *Passio*, which are imitated in later martyr acts, “une nouvelle rhétorique africaine” (Amat 1999: 301).

26. Dronke 1984: 17. Dronke uses words of Perpetua’s Latin like “shining immediacy” (16).

27. Ronsse 2006: 294–9, 306, and *passim*. Ronsse does not necessarily see a conflict between “absolute historical truth and fanciful fiction” (285, n. 6) as others like Kraemer do. Kraemer thinks the work a “literary production,” which cannot have been written by Perpetua herself and represents “the concerns and interests of the author rather than the relatively spontaneous jottings of an imprisoned Christian proselyte awaiting probable death” (2004: 6; see also 356–7). See also Kraemer and Lander 2000: 1048–68.

28. Ronsse 2006: 285. But she also says that this text is more revised lecture notes than a polished literary document (322). Ronsse stresses the rigorous training and education that Christian catechumens underwent (294–9); this education is revealed in the text of the *Passio* through their continuous oratorical engagements: prayer, argument, persuasive preaching, fighting for their beliefs, conversions, and exhortations (297).

29. Ronsse 2006: 308–12.

30. So Bremmer and Formisano 2012a: 5–6.

31. Bremmer and Formisano say, “Yet though Perpetua’s diary seems basically authentic, the editor did somewhat edit her text” (2012a: 6); see also Bremmer 2002: 86. Ameling likewise says, “The prosodic analysis confirmed at least three different authors in the *Passio* . . . some editing may have taken place, was perhaps even necessary, but that does not affect my argument—even if this editing succeeded in creating a document which can be interpreted as a unity” (2012: 81). See also Marksches, who joins Heffernan and Bremmer “in assuming that the so-called editor to a certain extent modified the textual sources attributed to Perpetua and Saturus, and that we are confronted with a total composition which represents the integration of originally disparate parts” (2012: 277). Heffernan points to one particular passage in Perpetua’s chapters where he sees a probable editorial insertion or interference. The editor concludes his introduction to the martyrs in *Passio* 2 by telling us that Perpetua wrote the narrative in her own hand (2.3). Then commences chapter 3, the beginning of Perpetua’s own narrative. In the first sentence, we read “Cum adhuc, *inquit*, cum prosecutoribus essemus et me pater verbis evertere cupiret et deicere pro sua affectione perseveraret” (“This is what she said: When we were still with our guards under house arrest and my father was eager, because of his affection for me, to wrestle me away from my faith by his words, and he kept trying to break my resolve”). The next sentence says, “Pater, inquam, vides, verbi gratia, vas hoc iacens, urceolum sive

aliud?” (“‘Father,’ I said, ‘do you see—as an example—this vessel lying here—a pitcher or whatever it is?’”). It is the use of the verb *inquit* (she said) or *inquam* (I said) that is odd. In the first sentence, *inquit* is in the third person singular (“she said”) even though this is part of Perpetua’s section and we would expect the first person singular to be used. In the second sentence the first person singular (*inquam*) is used, putting the words into Perpetua’s mouth. Most translators simply omit the awkward verb *inquit* so as not to have the editor intrude so harshly into Perpetua’s part of the narrative (see Heffernan 2012: 74–5 for a discussion of this and another odd bridging section after her second vision, which Heffernan believes was also added by the editor). Heffernan 1995 gives a fuller discussion of portions of Perpetua’s text that call into question the autobiographical status of the text (317–25).

32. Perkins 2009a: 167.

33. See Huber-Rebenich 1999: 195: “The reality that is reflected in (the accounts of martyrdom) has . . . undergone a literary stylization through the process of being written down.”

34. Bisbee 1988: 7 (citing U. Wilcken); 84–7. Bisbee is largely concerned with *commentarii*, forensic accounts of conversations between magistrates and martyrs.

35. See here Cooper 2011: 686; 700–1, n. 4. Cooper seems to take Perpetua’s narrative as emanating from her own voice, but she advances the possible theory that “the martyrdom component, which bears some traces of literary shaping, was written by a much later editor as a pious fiction designed to help readers to imagine the authors of the prison diaries as flesh-and-blood martyrs” (700–1, n. 4).

36. Bremmer and Formisano 2012a: 6. Ameling also points out that the instability of the text—which appeared in so many forms—came about largely because of the social conditions in which it was (re)produced (2012: 80). For a recent summary of the various and conflicting positions taken on the issue of authenticity, see Gonzalez 2014: 12–18. He eventually concludes that “the authorship of the first-hand sections of the *Passion of Perpetua* rests with the martyrs themselves” (18).

37. Bisbee 1988: 87.

38. See Robinson 1891: 3, n. 1 (on Harris’ change of mind); 1–9 (on the relation between the Latin and Greek texts); 10–15 (on the manuscripts of the *Passio*). For the Harris and Gifford text, see J. Rendel Harris and Seth K. Gifford, *The Acts of the Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* (London: C. J. Clay and Sons, 1890).

39. For a stemma of the manuscripts, see Heffernan 2012: 375; his appendix I (369–443) contains an in-depth discussion of the manuscripts and editions. Heffernan also discusses the Latin text on pp. 100–24. See also Robinson 1891: 1–15.

40. Other manuscripts preserve different titles, which list two of the male martyrs before Perpetua and Felicitas. See Bremmer and Formisano 2012a: 2.

41. On the early publication history of the *Passio*, see Amat 1996: 92–4.

42. For a good discussion of this thorny issue, see Amat 1996: 51–66; Kitzler 2015: 23–9. Farrell (2012: 320) refers to the “putatively more authentic work that appears to be a Greek translation”; he seems caught on the horns of the dilemma, nodding to those scholars who think the Greek manuscript more authentic but finally coming down on the side of most scholars who think the Latin to be primary. Whichever manuscript is primary, we cannot call either one a translation.

43. This does not mean, however, that the Greek version was primary. See in particular Robert 1982: 228–76 (esp. 253–6), who thought that Perpetua’s visions made precise reference to elements of the Pythian Games that had recently been staged in Carthage and that these references must first have been written in Greek. See also

Franchi de'Cavalieri 1896/1962: 41–154; Fridh 1968: 6–7; Lane Fox 1986/2006: 401; Potter 1993: 53–88 (esp. p. 57 and n. 31); Shaw 2004/1993: 307–8 and n. 63.

44. See Amat 1996: 55–6.

45. For a thorough discussion of the Latin and Greek texts, see Robinson 1891: 2–9; Amat 1996: 51–66; Heffernan 2012: 79–99. Heffernan mentions the greater specificity of the Latin text and misunderstandings of or abbreviations of Roman military language, technical terms, and legal formulas in the Greek text.

46. The Greek manuscript also preserves some important details omitted or perhaps wrongly given in the Latin manuscript (for example, that the name of the deceased proconsul who preceded Hilarianus was Minicius Opimianus [*Passio* 6.3]). See on Hilarianus, Birley 1993: 48–9; Bremmer and Formisano 2012a: 4; Heffernan 2012: 50–1 (on the name of the deceased proconsul).

47. See for the *Acta*, van Beek 1936: 104*–44* (discussion and description of the codices) and 55–73 (text). It was van Beek who used the term *Acta* to distinguish these shorter and later versions from the *Passio* (van Beek 1936: 58ff). In the manuscripts, both *Passio* and *Acta* are designated as *Passio*. See also Amat 1996: 265–303; Kitzler 2015: 101–16. Many scholars do not pay much attention to the *Acta* and regard them as inferior versions of the *Passio*. An exception is Monceaux 1963 (orig. Paris, 1901): 77–80.

48. Van Beek (1936) refers to the two versions of the *Acta* as A and B, Amat (1996) as I and II. Van Beek puts the number of manuscripts at seventy-six for A (twelfth–fifteenth centuries) and thirteen for B (eighth or ninth–seventeenth centuries). See van Beek 1936: 107*–34*. See also Cotter-Lynch 2016: 9 and n. 17 (who points out that there are eighty-nine manuscripts of the *Acta* and not forty-one, as Heffernan says [2102: 442]; he seems to be relying on Amat's list of the best-known manuscripts of the *Acta* [1996: 275–6]).

49. The *Acta* are, as Halporn states, “much closer in style to the sermons of Augustine than is the *Passio*” (1991: 235).

50. For a good discussion of the relationship between the *Passio* and the *Acta*, see van Beek, who lists the factual differences (1936: 98*–9*); Halporn 1991: 226–35, who also includes a good summary of the material found in the *Acta*. See also see Kitzler 2015: 98–116. See Bremmer and Formisano 2012a: 5 and nn. 28 and 31 (where they discuss a manuscript of sermons attributed to Augustine discovered in 2007, which contains a Latin phrase only found in *Acta* B or II, *in uteri onere*).

51. See on martyr acts and *commentarii* (court journals or records of trials), Bisbee 1988.

52. See here Bremmer 2012: 41. Bremmer points out that, even though it is not made explicit in the *Passio* that the women and men were separately interrogated, there is some evidence of that when in *Passio* 20 they are treated separately during their executions. Thus the author of the *Acta* might not have made up this detail entirely.

53. Kitzler 2007: 17, who cites here Aug. Sermon. 280.1; cf. Kitzler 2015: 105–16. Cf. also Shaw 2004/1993: 312–14, who refers to the “general ‘house cleaning’” that took place in the mid-fourth century to “make more manageable the marginal problematical areas of power, including sainthood and sexuality . . . the documents had to be ‘brought into line.’” Shaw points out that in the *Acta* (A 4.5), the proconsul/judge separates the group by gender, questioning the women second and tailoring his questions especially for them (introducing prominently the issue of Perpetua's and Felicitas' husbands, who are absent from the *Passio*).

1. So Shaw refers to an “immanent ‘presence’ of the author that exudes from her own account” (2004/1993: 306). He references Petroff’s *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature* here (1986: 21ff.) for a list of characteristics shared by visionary women. Petroff (1986: 21–3) discusses (mostly medieval) narratives that exemplify an “autobiographical impulse, that is, a desire to put into words the search for what we would call a self . . . to put into language the process of discovering and locating that self in relation to God.” This kind of revelation of self “came into existence through language and . . . in the course of visionary experience” (22).

2. On the dream aspects of the dream visions, see Miller 1994: 148–83, especially 150–2; Dodds 1965: 50–3. For example, Dodds mentions that the shepherd in vision one gives Perpetua cheese curds rather than milk from the sheep (4.9); this is the kind of time compression we might find in a dream (p. 51).

3. The Latin may read *experta sum* rather than *experrecta sum*; *experta sum* would be a vulgar Latin form. See Amat 1996: 207 ad 4.10.

4. See Amat 1996: 200–1 ad 4.1, who points out that the passive forms *ostendatur* (4.1) and *ostensum est* (4.2) express the passivity of the receiver of the vision. See also here Miller 1994: 150–1, who discusses the word *visio*, a “technical onirological term designating a prophetic dream” (151); this meaning is also conveyed by the noun *ostensio*, “a term that carries a symbolic or figurative sense in late-antique texts” (151). *Ostensio*, according to Amat, designates a “striking scene . . . that manifests wholly divine power” (Amat 1985: 68). As Amat points out, the word is as redolent of pagan culture as of the Christian world (Amat 1985: 68, n. 117 for parallels in both cultures). Perpetua also uses the Greek word *horoma* (or *horama*) to indicate her vision (10.1).

5. See Ronsse 2006: 310–11. Ronsse mentions that Saturus also uses *video* in the present tense in his vision (11.4, 12.3, 13.1; Ronsse 2006: 310).

6. See Ronsse 2006: 311: “the dramatic, or oracular, present tense thus challenges interpretations of historical events: they are not wholly of the past and cannot be understood without their continual recreation in the present, our remembering.”

7. For the psychoanalytical approach, see von Franz 1951; Rousselle 1987. Dodds sees the dreams as unlocking Perpetua’s unconscious (Dodds 1965: 50–1). Miller (1994) uses a feminist and Freudian approach.

8. Robert 1982; see also Habermehl (2004:74–103), who finds parallels for elements in Perpetua’s dreams (serpent, ladder) in other ancient cultures.

9. Bowersock 1995: 32.

10. See on this Robinson 1891: 26–43; he notes many parallels to Genesis, The Shepherd of Hermas, and, in Saturus’ vision, the Apocalypse of Peter. See also Waldner 2012: 201–19, especially 212–18.

11. See Waldner 2012: 203ff.

12. See Waldner 2012: 212–16; she cites parallels in Tertullian’s *De anima* and elsewhere for authoritative prophets among Christian congregations.

13. See Bowersock 1995: 51.

14. For these terms and this passage of Tertullian, see Robert 1982: 265–6. A *xystarchês* is the director or supervisor of an athletic association; the *epistatês* is the overseer or steward of the games.

15. The golden apples and green branch here have multiple possible associations. Golden apples are present in Greek mythology (the golden apples of the Hesperides, grown on a tree given by Earth [Ge] to Zeus and Hera at their wedding; the golden

apples in the myth of Atalanta); the tree in the myth of the Hesperides could also be linked to biblical stories (the tree of life in Gen. 2:8–9, 3:2–3, but there is not an apple here). See on this Halporn 1984: 41. Robert takes the apples to refer to the prize given out at the Pythian Games (which had recently been presented in Carthage); see Robert 1982: 271–2. And apples are also often associated with women and the erotic in the ancient world; see Miller 1994: 182–3, who points out the apple's frequent association with Aphrodite in classical texts.

16. For biblical references in Perpetua's dreams, see Corsaro 1999; for agonistic references, see Robert 1982: 228–76, who reads the vision of Perpetua against the background of the Pythian Games in honor of Apollo that had been recently presented in Carthage.

17. The figure of the *lanista* comes from the gladiatorial games, but the fight in her fourth vision that Perpetua engages in is a *pancratium*, an athletic event.

18. Bowersock 1995: 52.

19. Shaw 2004/1993: 307, n. 62; Byron 2002: 44–5, and *passim*; Robert disagrees with this interpretation and asks, if this does betray racial or ethnic prejudice, why not an Ethiopian (who usually plays this role)? (1982: 272). Robert says that the Egyptian is the obvious choice since there were many Egyptian athletes at the various games, and Perpetua would no doubt have seen them in Carthage. See also on this den Boeft and Bremmer 1982: 390, who say that, by this time, the devil was already represented as black; Habermehl 2004: 145–60.

20. See Dronke 1984: 14; cf. Apuleius, who in book 11 of the *Metamorphoses* highlights the Egyptian cults, in particular the cult of Isis. The *Metamorphoses* appeared in North Africa shortly before Perpetua was born and may well have influenced her. Dronke (285–6, n. 58) discusses several words used by Perpetua that also appear in Apuleius, some of them fairly rare, and suggests that, although the evidence is not conclusive, these verbal correspondences (e.g., *adtonitus* in *Met.* 11.35 and *Passio* 10.5) might show at least “faint memories of a book that Perpetua had firmly left behind.”

21. Salisbury 1997: 110. However, there could be no influence here of Heliodorus on Perpetua because Heliodorus lived later than Perpetua.

22. For a good and wide-ranging discussion of the characterization of Christians as athletes, see Shaw 1996, *passim*; Shaw 2011: 587–629.

23. All references to the Bible are to *The Revised English Bible*.

24. See here Simpson 1993: 298, who discusses the roots of asceticism and points out that asceticism, which has roots in the East, was not institutionalized until the fourth century when the persecutions had stopped.

25. Tert. *Ad mart.* 2.8–10; Ronsse 2006: 316–17.

26. Amat 1996 (197) says that *sufferentia* (a Christian Latin term) is more intense than *patientia* (cf. Tert. *Patientia* 13 here) and that the intensity of Perpetua's style in *Passio* 3.5 (*et mihi Spiritus dictavit non aliud petendum ab aqua nisi sufferentiam carnis*) seems to correspond to the adoption of an ecstatic state here by Perpetua. For the self-discipline of Perpetua and her fellow martyrs in their attempts to follow in Christ's footsteps, see Pettersen 1987.

27. Maturus, one of the martyrs in Lyons in the 170s, is called a *gennaion agônistên* [noble athlete] (cf. Musurillo 1972, *Mart. Lugdun.* 17, 66–7). Bowersock (1995: 50) takes this to mean that Maturus was in fact an athlete, but the passage could equally well mean (and to me appears to mean) that he was metaphorically an athlete in the way that his fellow martyrs were.

28. See Bowersock 1995: 50–1; cf. Potter 1993: 53–4, and *passim*.

29. In similar fashion, the ideology surrounding virginity, chastity, and asceticism was not a new phenomenon but rather took its ideas from the surrounding culture and added to it a theological dimension. Women's sexuality had long been seen as a commodity to be traded among men, and the Christian virgins, who become increasingly common in the period after Constantine, followed this path but added a religious dimension to the mix. See on this Castelli 2008: 92–6.

30. See Monceaux 1963 (1901): 88, who says that Perpetua's last vision is a "curious mixture of reality, fantasy, and the symbolic" ("scène étrange où se mêlent la réalité, le fantastique et le symbole"); this is not simply a metaphorical tale but Perpetua becomes here (or comes very close to being) an athlete ("le martyr assimilé à l'athlète"). The description of Perpetua treading on the head of the Egyptian (10.11: *calcavi illi caput*) may also refer to Gen 3:15: "I shall put enmity between you and the woman, between your brood and hers. They will strike at your head, and you will strike at their heel"). For a listing of the words signifying combat and athletic contests in the *Passio* (and other *acts*), see Saxer 1986: 212–13.

31. Perhaps this is why the crowd is described as "astonished" (*adtonitum*, 10.5).

32. For example, the Scillitan martyrs (180 CE), whose group was composed of seven men and five women. See Shaw 2004/1993: 297–9, who points out that the female martyrs before Perpetua were part of "collective" martyrdoms and that in these groups, the focus tended to be on the men (Shaw 297–8). See also on Blandina, Frend 1993: 87–95.

33. Musurillo 1972: #5, 18–19; see also Eus. *HE* 5.1.

34. See Shaw 2004/1993: 299.

35. For a good discussion of what *hypomonê* meant in some early Christian texts (in particular 4 Maccabees), see Shaw 1996, especially 275–300.

36. The so-called Second Sophistic was a rhetorical, philosophical, and cultural movement from around the first to the third centuries CE among Greek writers; they turned back to the classical past for their language and inspiration.

37. For discussions of the destabilizing and constructedness of gender and social status in the early empire, see Barton 1994a: 83–92; Gleason 1995.

38. See Barton 1994b: 60.

39. See, on the construction of a "suffering self" in Christian thought and on the important influence of pagan discourse in this construction, Perkins 1995 and p. 89 for quote.

40. Sen. *Ep.* 66.36, 71.17; see Shaw 1996: 293, n. 77. While Shaw sees Seneca as downplaying *patientia* as a primary virtue, Edwards stresses the continuity of Seneca's texts with the Christian uses of this term (Edwards 2007: 217 and n. 41).

41. See Shaw 1996: 294 and n. 82.

42. Sen. *Ep.* 78.19: "Quid ergo? Non sentis si illum muliebriter tuleris?"

43. On the different uses of *patientia* and its widely varying meanings, depending often on the gender or rank of the person to whom it was attributed, see Kaster 2002: 133–44. As Kaster points out, the meanings of *patientia* can range from "endurance" to "passivity" and "submissiveness," but its root meaning is that it is the "quality entailed in being the recipient, not the generator, of action or experience" (135); this, however, I believe is called into question in Christian texts like Perpetua's, where it comes closer to what Kaster calls "aggressive passivity" (136), a phrase that Kaster uses reluctantly but that suits the stance that many Christian martyrs took.

44. See, for a discussion of these ambiguous uses of *patientia* in the Stoic philosophers, especially Seneca, Kaster 2002: 133–44; Bartsch 2005: 81–3; Edwards 2005: 84–90.

45. Bartsch 2005: 82.

46. See Shaw 1996: 276ff.
47. Shaw 1996: 276.
48. Burrus 2008: 60, who has a good discussion of “the mirroring oscillations of complexly gendered subjectivities.”
49. Tilley 1994: 837 and n. 39: *Sufferentia* and *patientia* are translations in the Vulgate for *hypomonê* in the New Testament (= Christian Testament). Tilley says, “Nowhere else in early Christian literature is *sufferentia* or *hypomonê* linked to words of the body” (855, n. 39).
50. The word *hypomonê*, however, has a long history before this. Spicq traces its use back to Plato and Aristotle, who both connect it with *karteria tês psychês* (strength or endurance of soul), and up through Christian texts (Spicq 1982: 658–65).
51. This is a letter on obedience of slaves to their masters, but it is also applicable to any situation that is violent and unequal in power; cf. Shaw 1996: 289 and n. 63.
52. So Kaster says: “*patientia* demonstrates that you are self-possessed—in your own *potestas*, not that of circumstance—and that you are acting under the direction of your own will” (2002: 137). Kaster is not talking about martyrs here, but rather Roman heroes, but what he says applies well to the psychology of Christian martyrdom. At the end of his article Kaster mentions the role that the quality of *patientia* played for Christians: “(the problem of *patientia*) could be solved only by appeal to truths thought to lie outside merely human relations: by Stoicism . . . or by Christianity’s yielding of the self to an all-loving God” (144).
53. Shaw 1996: 289 and n. 66.
54. See Burrus 2008: 70.
55. See Bremmer 2002: 94–5, who cites this passage from 1 Clement 8.2. He also cites comparable Jewish examples of joy in endurance and suffering: 2 Macc. 6:30; 4 Macc. 9:29 and 31; 10:20 (Bremmer 2002: 94, n. 81).
56. See on Tertullian’s reactions to Seneca and other pagan writers, Edwards 2007: 217 and n. 42; Straw 2002: 43–5.
57. For discussions of Perpetua’s temporary transformation into a man and of the meanings of transcending femaleness in the early patristic period, see Tilley 1994: 844–5; Simpson 1993: 313; Shaw 2004/1993: 308–9 and n. 67, 316–19 (for Augustine and Quodvultdeus).
58. Despite the fact that Perpetua sets the rubdown in the usual context of an athletic contest, there is a clear erotic element in this act of a woman being rubbed with oil by handsome male assistants. See Shaw 2004/1993: 308 and n. 66.
59. Tilley 1994: 844.
60. Tilley 1994: 856, n. 65; cf. Arist. *De gen. anim.* 2.1 (732a); *Eph.* 4:13.
61. See Vogt 1985: 73–9, especially 76.
62. Vogt 1985: 73–9; 4 Macc. 15:23.
63. See on this Vogt 1985: 72–80, especially 74 and 80; Mazzucco 1989: 122–3. The metaphors of woman turning into man and female becoming male were commonly used in Gnosticism. Cf. Clement of Alexandria, who says, “Souls are neither male nor female, when they no longer marry nor are given in marriage. And is not woman translated into man, when she is become equally unfeminine, and manly, and perfect?” (Clement, *Stromates* 6.12, vol. 2, p. 362 [= PG vol. 9, p. 321, secs. 51–3]).
64. See Perkins 2009a: 171, n. 21 citing Robert 1982: 256–8.
65. See Tilley 1994: 857, n. 72, who cites Christian passages that use athletic metaphors, e.g., I Cor. 9:25; II Tim. 2:5; Eusebius *HE* 5.1.19 on Blandina.
66. Rousselle 1987: 204; cf. von Franz 1951: 389–496 and 1980: 44–75.

67. Rousselle 1987: 201; cf. also Devereux 1976: 89–91.
68. Rousselle 1987: 202–3.
69. Robert 1982: 256. Robert (p. 256, n. 105) gives the Greek for this passage in the *Passio*: kai exeduthên kai egenêthên arrên, *Passio* 10.7.
70. Shaw 2004/1993: 308.
71. See Kitzler 2015: 47–51.
72. Palladius, *The Lausiac History*, “Introductory Pieces,” 5, trans. W. K. Lowther Clarke (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, and New York: Macmillan, 1918: 37); cf. Miles 1989: 55 and 206, n. 11.
73. See on this Miles 1989: 53–77; Rossi 1984: 64–5.
74. So Jerome says that a woman who demonstrated such manliness of spirit was “forgetful of her sex and the fragility of her body” (*oblita sexus et fragilitatis corporeae*), *Ep.* 108.14. Likewise, Augustine speaks admiringly of his mother, Monica, saying “With these words, she spoke out in such a way that, we, forgetting completely her sex, might have believed that some great man was seated with us” (*Beat. vit.* 10). See Davis 2001: 53; also Cloke 1995: 213–15 and Castelli 2008: 85–6 for other examples of women who were said to have shown manliness of spirit through their asceticism and virginity.
75. Thecla of Iconium is a young, unmarried virgin who is determined that she will convert to Christianity after hearing the preachings of the apostle Paul. She then deserts her fiancé, pledges herself to celibacy, and becomes a disciple of Paul; in some versions of the story, she cuts off her hair and dresses as a man. She is recognized for her example of chastity and piety and is sometimes recognized as the first female martyr. For the acts of Paul and Thecla and her story, see Clark 1983: 78–88; Burrus 1987: 1–2, 125–7; Davis 2001: 31–4, 53–4, 185–6; for other women who evaded their female natures by disguising themselves as men, see Castelli 2008: 84–5.
76. See Miles 1989: 55; Praet 2003: 463–4, on the gender hierarchy being turned upside down by the behavior of Perpetua and her father; Kitzler 2007: 8–9, for Perpetua’s pulling away from her familial and societal bonds as she becomes more certain of herself and less of a daughter, wife, and mother.
77. As Castelli says, there are male encomia to women who become male that contain admiration but also condemnation and distrust of the women who crossed gender boundaries in this way (1991, 44–5). Cutting one’s hair, as Thecla did, was regarded as a negative act since hair was identified with the subjugation of women and thus these women were resisting the normal order of things (1991, 44).
78. Philo, *Quaestiones et solutiones in Exodum* 1.8; see MacDonald 1987: 99.
79. On this conundrum, see Ruether 1993: 273, and passim. Cf. what Davis observes about this phenomenon: “On the one hand, the saintly women struggled desperately to free themselves of the shackles of male authority. Yet, in doing so, they may have unwittingly colluded with the very forces they were attempting to bypass” (1985: 185).
80. Clark 1986: 43.
81. For Perpetua’s husband, see Chapters 1 and 6. There are many possible explanations for his absence in Perpetua’s narrative (although he is added in the *Acta*: See Amat 1996: 30–1). Among them: He was dead; he was away on an extended journey; he was estranged from Perpetua and her family because he was not a Christian. Praet posits that he was both unwilling to associate with Perpetua because of her conversion to Christianity and that he had departed from the area (2003: 468). Recently Cooper has suggested that Perpetua could have been a concubine whose child was born out of wedlock and thus was turned over to her own family during her imprisonment and not to her husband’s family (Cooper 2011: 688–90).

82. Tilley 1994: 836.

83. Gal. 3:28; Jerome, *Comment. on Ep. III* (Eph. 5:28); *Ep.* 71.2.2; *Ep.* 75.2.2; cf. Clark 1986: 43. But, as Cameron points out, Pauline Christianity “offered little direct encouragement to women to think that they were or could be really equal to men” (1980: 64), and we cannot take these texts as evidence for any real change in women’s social experience (1980: 66).

84. Clark 1979: 55; see Cameron 1980: 64, and *passim*, for Paul’s pronouncements on the relative places of woman and man.

85. Cameron 1980: 64, and *passim*; Clark 1986; Castelli 1991, 2008.

86. Castelli 1991: 42.

87. See Simpson 1993: 313–14, who argues that writers like Jerome and Chrysostom wanted to reduce “the *appearance* of female sexuality” (313); she takes issue with Clark 1979, who argues that Jerome’s concern about spiritual women renouncing jewelry and fancy dress “points to his attempt to neutralize their femininity, as that was socially defined, as well as their biological femaleness” (Clark 1979: 58).

88. See on this Tilley 1994: 845.

89. A. S. Wilkins, in his commentary on Horace’s *Epistles*, says, “*mascula* is a term of praise, not of blame, as the Scholiasts strangely suppose” (Wilkins, ed., *The Epistles of Horace*, London: Macmillan and Co, 1958, 233 *ad loc.*). Both Wilkins and the scholiasts seem to have been caught off guard by Horace’s lovely ambiguity in this word.

90. Brooten suggests that the background to the phrase *mascula Sappho* in Horace *Ep.* 1.19.28, as well as the phrase *mascula libido* in Horace *Epodes* 5.41, might be the “masculine desires” attributed to *tribades*, or females who love other females, by writers in antiquity (especially by Christian writers such as Paul; see Brooten 1996, 34ff.).

91. Brooten suggests that the word *mascula*, when applied to Sappho, implies exactly this (Brooten 1996, 34ff.), and she finds support for this argument in Porphyryon, a scholiast, who says that Sappho is *mascula* perhaps because of her homoeroticism (Brooten 1996, 34, n. 24).

92. The fact that the very ambiguous word *masculus* is used here of Perpetua by Perpetua could support the argument that Perpetua did not herself write the narrative but that rather an editor or narrator wrote the account for and about her. The use of the word could be seen as an uneasy attempt to explain how Perpetua could fight with and conquer such a fearsome opponent.

93. M. Bal sees Perpetua as moving away from femininity and toward masculinity throughout. Perpetua is, she says, a “proto-feminist heroine” in her victory over gender limitations and a “proto-post-modern” in her victory over narration (1991, 227–41; quotes from p. 241).

94. See Williams 2012 for these references and for a good discussion of the issue of gender in the *Passio*.

95. See Perkins, “The Rhetoric of the Maternal Body,” 2009a: 167. Although Perkins uses this to argue against the authenticity of Perpetua’s authorship and for this narrative being a rhetorical construction of Perpetua and Felicitas (by a male narrator?) in order to “valorize the male body,” I am interested in this observation here only insofar as it highlights the bodily aspect of Perpetua and her femaleness.

96. Perkins 2009a: 169.

97. For an extensive discussion of the comments of Augustine and Quodvultdeus on Perpetua and Felicitas about two centuries after their deaths, see Chapter 8 of this book.

98. See Shaw 2004/1993: 314–20 for Augustine and Perpetua. He points out that these sermons may be only a small sample; he might have delivered one each year

on this anniversary. For a list of Augustine's sermons delivered on the anniversaries of martyrdoms ("lectures liturgiques"), see Saxer 1980: 315–21 (p. 316 for Perpetua and Felicitas, on the date of March 7, sermons 280, 281, and 282). A fuller version of one of the sermons on Perpetua by Augustine was recently discovered and published; see Schiller et al. 2008: 227–84; 260–4 for the Perpetua text.

99. Aug. Sermon. 282.3 (van Beek 1936: 153*–154*) (= Migne, *PL* 38, 1285–6). See for Augustine's sermons, van Beek 1936: 149*–154*; Shewring, in his 1931 edition of *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, has included a translation of the sermons (1931b).

100. Aug. *De natura et origine animae* 4.18.26 (see van Beek 1936: 155* for the first part of this passage); see here Shaw 2004/1993: 318–19. For most of the second translation, I have used R. J. Teske, trans. and J. E. Rotelle, ed., *The Works of Saint Augustine*. Pt. 1, vol. 23: *Answer to the Pelagians*, 4.18.26, p. 550 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997).

101. Aug. Sermon. 280.1 (Migne *PL* 38: 1281): "the believers are . . . according to the inward man found to be neither male nor female" ([*credentes . . . secundum interiorem hominem, nec masculus, nec femina inveniuntur*]; cf. Aug. Sermon. 281.1 [Migne *PL* 38: 1284]).

102. See Tilley 1994: 851.

103. And indeed Tilley goes on to discuss how the sexuality and maternity of women such as Perpetua and Felicity was altered in later times when they were transformed into virgins (1994: 851–2).

104. Quoted by Shaw 2004/1993: 321, who cites here R. Braun, ed. *Opera Quodvultdeo Carthaginensi Episcopo Tributa* (CCL 60, Turnhout: Brepols, 1976; no page or title of work given, and I have been unable to find the reference in Braun's edition).

105. See Grig 2004: 34.

106. See here Shaw 1996: 278: "The point is to deploy one's body so as to change the assumed rules of the game—they (the spectators) are there, voyeuristically, both to enjoy the spectacle of punishment and to see it as underwriting the values: they order; you obey." See also Fagan 2011 on spectators at Roman games.

107. Perpetua may walk in last because the women were considered the most important and most titillating part of the show. But this ultimate position also marks her as the holiest; see Paul, who says "for it seems to me God has made us apostles the last act in the show, like men condemned to death in the arena, a spectacle to the whole universe" (I Cor. 4:9).

108. Shaw 2004/1993: 287. Tertullian later remarks on the need for women to be veiled to protect them from such intrusive gazes (*De virginibus velandis* 14).

109. See Perkins 2013: 188 for comments on how Perpetua's self-possession, agency, and "claim for recognition from the other of their status as equally human beings" emerge in *Passio* 18 (and elsewhere). For the importance of clothing and dress for the image and perception of early Christian women, see Upson-Saia 2011.

110. Compare other female martyrs such as Agnes, Blandina, and Thecla. For Thecla and Blandina, see earlier in this chapter. Agnes was an early virgin martyr whose story became popular in the fourth century when it was told by the bishop Ambrose and the Christian poet Prudentius. Although Agnes is a sexually continent and pure virgin, she is eroticized and sexualized in the accounts of her, particularly in Prudentius (see Burrus 1995: 25–46; Grig 2004: 79–85; 2005: 111–22).

111. See Shaw 2004/1993: 290.

112. For the voyeuristic and erotic overtones in *Passio* 20, see Kitler 2015: 58–60.

113. Cf. Agnes in Prudentius, *Peristephanon*; see on this Grig 2005: 113–14, who discusses both nudity and the symbolism of hair. Although Grig says that “by contrast it was very rare for non-harlot female saints to be depicted unclothed” (120, n. 33), there are certainly many examples of public nudity inflicted as punishment on non-harlot martyrs, as we have seen. The symbolism of a woman’s hair in connection with nakedness is also discussed by Miles 1989: 48–52.

114. So Shaw: “cast in that rhetorical mixture of eroticism and outright pornography of which Jerome, a saint, was particularly capable” (1996: 272); cf. Shaw 1996: 304–6 on using violence as a form of social control.

115. See Grig 2004: 171, nn. 22 and 2005: 116 for mythological forebears; Shaw 2004/1993: 291; Grig 2005: 121, n. 56 for the novel.

116. On violence done to Christian women and on Agnes in particular, see Scourfield 2018.

117. Nicole Loraux, who has famously written on the deaths of virgins in *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman* (1987), says that women tend to die by the throat (52–3), a place that has “special significance for women, linked as it is in ancient gynaecological theory to the womb” (Grig 2005: 117 and n. 67). In contrast, the breast, *pectus*, is usually the site of males’ deaths.

Chapter 3

1. So Pervo (1994: 244) says, “The ApocActs are novels not because they share . . . sufficient motifs with Chariton and Heliodorus, but because they are novels: the products of an extended narrative designed by an author who has welded various sources and forms into a unified whole.” For a discussion of the generic parameters of the novel, see Futre Pinheiro 2014: 201–16.

2. See the cautionary note issued by, among others, Gonzalez, who says that we must be careful not to assume that the martyr acts and passions belonged to any one literary genre at the time of their composition (2014: 10–12). These acts were, if we must use the word “genre” at all, “a mixed genre of autobiographical, biographical and introductory/concluding text” (Gonzalez 11, quoting Van Den Eynde 2005: 27).

3. Morales 2009: 1–12, esp. 4, 11. Morales, in reference to the novel, says, “policing the boundaries—allowing some works in and keeping others out—is a means of ensuring that we can chart these expectations” (4).

4. On assigning value to different kinds of texts (particularly “religious” and “secular”), see Cooper 1996: 22.

5. See Konstan 1998b: 3–17. Konstan claims that the invention of fiction arrives with the rise of the ancient novel (3).

6. Bowersock 1994. The quote is from the page immediately after the title pages (translation by M. Glenny).

7. Bowersock 1994: 1.

8. See for a collection of most of the apocryphal Gospels, Ehrman and Pleše 2011.

9. See Stephens and Winkler 1995 for a collection of the fragmentary Greek novels, including texts, translations, and commentary.

10. For the first view, see Bowersock 1994: 127 (who argues that the Gospels or New Testament inspired the apocryphal acts, which then inspired the ancient novel, and then the martyr narratives appear as early as the second century); Andújar 2012: 139–52.

Bowersock's view (as against many others) argues for the direction of influence going from Christian to pagan rather than the reverse (127). See also Thomas 1998: 277.

11. See Konstan 1998b: 16 (an allusion to the "multiplicity of cultural repertoires to which the novels may appeal"). Cf. also Thomas 1998: 273–91, especially 277.

12. See, for a discussion of Socrates as a precursor to the Christian martyrs. Bowersock 1995: 8–9 (who does not believe that we can call Socrates a "martyr" since the word *martus* did not have the meaning at that time that it later came to have [it meant only "witness"])). Moss, however, argues that Socrates could well be thought a proto-Christian martyr (2013: 36–9).

13. The martyr texts of Apollonius and Pionius in the second and third centuries each cite Socrates as an example of martyrdom, but in general the Christian church was not favorable toward using such pagan examples (cf. Bowersock 1995: 8–9).

14. See Thomas 1998; Braginskaya 2012 on *Joseph and Aseneth* (which she refers to as possibly the "first novel," dating back to perhaps the second century BCE). For Pseudo-Callisthenes' Alexander Romance, see Hägg 1983: 125–40; K. Dowden's introduction to and translation of the text in Reardon 1989/2008: 650–735.

15. See on this Thomas 1998. Konstan uses the term "open text" for the Alexander Romance (cited by Thomas 1998: 289, n. 42). Many ancient works besides the ones in question spring from an oral tradition, for example Greek epic, but these do not concern us here. On Greek epic, see G. Nagy, *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

16. See Halporn 1991: 230–1 and n. 23; Delehay 1921: 173 (for quote) and 366–7: "Ce qui les attend sur le terrain de l'hagiographie, c'est l'instabilité et l'arbitraire, un mouvement perpétuel qui rend très difficile à saisir non seulement l'état initial d'un texte, mais un moment donné de son évolution."

17. See Heffernan 2012: 375 for a proposed stemma of the manuscripts; see Amat 1996: 90, for another proposed stemma (and p. 96 for a list of the manuscripts).

18. Amat (1996: 275–6) lists twenty-eight manuscripts of Text I of the *Acta* (in van Beek, these are Text A) and thirteen manuscripts of Text II (= B in van Beek), but these are only the best-known ones. See also van Beek 1936: 56–7 for a list of the manuscripts of the *Acta*.

19. Cf. here Ronsse 2006 (on the rhetorical flavor of the *Passio*); Huber-Rebenich 1999, especially 195ff., for the literary stylization of the *Passio*.

20. See Tomas Hägg's difficulty in trying to determine what exactly to call the Alexander Romance. Is it a romanticized biography or an historical novel? Both names are used by Hägg in different assessments. See Hägg 1983: 125–40; Thomas 1998: 279–80 and n. 19.

21. Bowersock notes, "no one seems to have asked whether acts, whatever the genre, could itself have influenced the novelists. Once again we have the familiar failure to look for the impact of Christianity on polytheistic culture" (1994: 139, n. 43). He postulates that the Gospel stories were amplified by the apocryphal acts, which inspired the polytheist novels, which themselves inspired the one example of a Christian novel that is known (in excerpt form), the *Clementine Recognitions* (1994: 121–43).

22. Christians may have continued to read and to enjoy the novels despite their rather racy and titillating plots and details. On this see Bowersock (1994: 142 and n. 49), who takes issue with MacMullen's claim that the novels fell out of favor once Christianity took hold (see R. MacMullen, "What Difference Did Christianity Make?" *Historia* 35 (1986) 322–43; repr. in R. MacMullen, *Changes in the Roman Empire: Essays in the Ordinary* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990], 142–55. Bowersock points

out that novels were read, admired, and used for various purposes into the Byzantine period; there was even a saint said to have been sired by Leucippe and Cleitophon, heroes of Achilles Tatius' novel. See Klauck 2008: 9. Two authors of the novels were later said to have become bishops in the Christian tradition; this invention may have allowed Christian readers of novels to read such a genre and feel that there was a moral component to them.

23. See Klauck 2008: 14.

24. For the texts of these and essays on them, see James 1924; Hennecke-Schneemelcher 1992; Klauck 2008. For the dating of the apocryphal acts, see Hennecke-Schneemelcher 1992: 75–85; Klauck 2008: 1–5. Other acts composed in Greek in this period were, for example, the acts of Xanthippe, the acts of Polyxena, and the acts of Philip; I will not consider these. See Davies 1980: 3–16; Klauck 2008: 231–53.

25. See Davies 1980: 3–10 for a summary of how different scholars have dated these works. On the acts of Andrew, see MacDonald 1990. See also Perkins who says that the canonical acts of the apostles are now “increasingly recognized as belonging to the second century” (2012: 113). Klauck (2008) discusses in detail the dating of the five major apocryphal acts and other lesser-known acts.

26. See Perkins 1985, esp. 212; Pervo 1987: 122ff.; Klauck 2008.

27. Hägg 1983: 5.

28. Thomas 1998: 274. It should be noted that many other novels are known to us, mostly in fragments, that may have been earlier. See Stephens and Winkler 1995, who date the *Ninos* (the earliest to have been written that we know of) to the early first century CE. Holzberg says that “Their beginnings as a genre probably lie in the late Hellenistic period, and they came into their prime in the first and second centuries AD” (1995: 1). For work on both the individual Greek and Roman novels and their genre, influences, and intertextuality, see the recent articles in Cueva and Byrne 2014.

29. Chariton and Xenophon, thought to be the authors of the earliest of the five Greek novels that are preserved, are sometimes called “pre-Sophistic” since they likely predate the “Second Sophistic.” The other three Greek novels fall during this period (see Hägg 1983: 34–5, 81–108; Thomas 1998: 273–5). For Chariton, see Anderson 2014: 13–25.

30. Hägg (1983: 54–73) discusses Heliodorus at length and points out that, in this novel, we may have a reference to an external event that took place in 350 CE (p. 59).

31. Cf. Bremmer 1998: 161–7. Bremmer dates Heliodorus to the third century CE at the latest. See also Pervo 1994: 251; he says that it is no accident that the apocryphal acts and the novel flourished at about the same time since they all respond to “similar and evolving tastes and needs.”

32. Hägg 1983: 162–3; Klauck 2008: 193–229.

33. Hägg 1983: 163. See also Bowersock 1994: 139–43; Klauck 2008: 199–200. Klauck provisionally dates the two parts of the work to the early to middle fourth century.

34. Heffernan tries to establish some commonality among these narratives (“generic criteria”), saying that martyr narratives are “expository narratives that describe a martyrdom” (2012: 8, n. 3). Contra, Bremmer says that to use the term *Martyr acts* is to use a modern construct to impose a false unity on a heterogeneous group of texts (2002: 78).

35. Bowersock, discussing whether Stephen was the first martyr (as the term *πρωτομάρτυς* [*protomartus*] has been thought to mean), says that there was uncertainty in post-Constantinian times whether the first martyr was “Stephen, Thecla, or Jesus himself” (1995: 76). See Barnes 2016: 48–9 for ten “independently preserved early Christian hagiographical documents” down to the year 260 that have withstood historical scrutiny (and that predate Perpetua). Barnes dates the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* at 157 CE. But this

has been disputed by several scholars including Moss, who has argued that this text is probably not an eyewitness account but rather dates from the first half of the third century CE (perhaps with elements that come out of an earlier oral tradition or earlier written account). See Moss 2010; 2012: 57–76; 2013: 94–104. Ehrman also argues strenuously that the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* cannot be an eyewitness account written right after the martyrdom in the mid-second century; rather it was written at least fifty years later and is a “forgery,” a legendary account written as if it was an eyewitness account that was factually accurate (2013: 493–502; quote on p. 501). Ehrman would argue much the same for the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (2013: 502–4).

36. Bowersock 1995: 13; Moss 2013: 23–9.

37. Bremmer 2002: 80.

38. See on this question Hägg, who (in reference to the apocryphal acts and the Greek novel) maintains, “these similarities in narrative structure and motifs do not imply that the acts of the apostles should be regarded as ‘novels’ *tout court*. They have other important elements, for instance those linking them to ‘aretology’, miracle tales demonstrating the power of the gods over mankind On the whole, it is inadvisable . . . to press a paternity suit, categorically proving or disproving that the acts are ‘descended’ from one genre or other” (1983: 160–1). Cf. also Konstan 1998a: 32.

39. See Pervo 1994. For an account of what little we know of their historical background and their transmission in various languages and translations, see Bremmer 1998: 161–7.

40. Pervo 1994: 243.

41. See Perkins 1985.

42. Hennecke-Schneemelcher 1992: 129, 139, 141.

43. Hennecke-Schneemelcher 1992: 385, sec. 114.

44. Hennecke-Schneemelcher 1992: 404, sec. 168.

45. See Perkins 1985: 219; Burrus 1987: 96–9.

46. The apocryphal acts are so focused on female characters that many scholars have believed that women were the authors of these stories. See on this Burrus 1987: 98; Konstan 1998a:32; Cooper 1996: 62–7. See also Hennecke-Schneemelcher 1992: 81. Schneemelcher maintains that it is the apostles who are in the center of the apocryphal acts and not the “liberated women,” as certain American scholars (Davies, MacDonald, Burrus) have maintained. See in particular for this theme Davies 1980. Cooper argues that the apocryphal acts are about contests between men and threats to male authority, and that the heroine, while an important figure, is “not a speaker but a listener” (1996: chapter 3, esp. 62–7; quote on p. 63).

47. Burrus 1995; Cooper 1996: 65–7.

48. The dating of the novels is far from certain or resolved. See Cooper 1996: 21, who gives a range from the first century BCE to the sixth century CE. Reardon gives a range from the first century CE to perhaps the third or fourth centuries CE (1989/2008: 5). Chariton is likely the earliest, with Heliodorus at the end. See also Hägg 1983: 5–73; Pervo 1987: 86–114; Konstan 1998b: 13.

49. See for a longer list of shared traits, Söder 1932: 148; Reardon 1989/2008: 2; Stephens and Winkler 1995; Cueva and Byrne 2014.

50. Reardon 1989/2008: 2. Note, however, that trying to find unifying themes is difficult. So Pervo: “Novels are not a unified phenomenon with a single *lex operis* (generic formula). They cannot be dealt with by reference to a single theory” (1987: 101).

51. See previous discussion for apocryphal acts; Pervo 1994; Andújar 2012: *passim*, esp. 139 (and n. 5) and 140.

52. See Konstan 1998a; Perkins 1995: *passim*, and esp. 25–6.
53. See Cooper 1996: 28–31.
54. *Ethiopica* 8.9.13–14 (J. R. Morgan translation in Reardon 1989/2008, 526–7). As it happens, Charicleia’s escape from the flames is not a miracle but is due to one of the tokens (a magic ring) given to her when she was exposed as a baby.
55. For a full explication, see Andújar 2012: 140–50.
56. For these episodes, see the acts of Paul and Thecla, secs. 22 and 32–9 (Hennecke-Schneemelcher 1992: 243, 245–6).
57. Andújar 2012: 139–52.
58. See Andújar 2012: 141–6. Andújar argues that these women are not eroticized as women in the Greek novels are (for example, Callirhoe in Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe*). However, despite the fact that these women are presented as chaste and virginal, they are often eroticized at the same time; there are erotic elements in the presentation of Perpetua.
59. Of course the ending of the two stories is very different: Thecla remains a chaste adherent of Paul, while Heliodorus’ Charicleia and Theagenes end up at last in a desired marriage.
60. Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Cleitophon* 6.21 (Winkler translation in Reardon 1989/2008, p. 259).
61. See Shaw 2004/1993: 291. Shaw says here that the Achilles Tatius’ text was “precisely contemporary with Perpetua’s youth” (291, n. 24). See further Plepelits 2003: 387–91 for the dating of Achilles Tatius. Perpetua’s drawing of the sword to her own throat (*Passio* 21.9) is an example of willingly accepting brutal physical torture. Cf. also the story of Blandina (see Musurillo 1972: 67–81 [*The Martyrs of Lyons*]).
62. Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Cleitophon* 6.22 (Winkler translation in Reardon 1989/2008, 259).
63. Cf. *Passio* 21.10: “Perhaps so great a woman—one who was feared by the unclean spirit—could not have been killed in any other way, unless she herself had willed it.” On the similarities of the heroine of the Greek novel to Christian martyrs, especially their sexualization, see Burrus 1995: 25–46; Cooper 1996: 30–1.
64. Plepelits 2003: 388, 391.
65. David Konstan, in his book *Sexual Symmetries*, might argue differently. He sees the reciprocal and equal passion between male and female in the novel as evidence of a decline from the city-state, which prized marriage for its dynastic and property value, to a later period in which marriage could be a sharing of romantic love between two individuals. Cooper, on the other hand, argues that the love pairs represented in the Greek novel can as easily represent a conservative set of social values and a desire to see marriage as a stabilizing institution (1996: 36–44).
66. Cooper 1996: 23–4, 30–1, 43–4.
67. Cf. Burrus 1995; Scourfield 2018.
68. Cooper maintains that the conflict in the apocryphal acts “is essentially a conflict between *men*. The challenge posed here by Christianity is not really about women, or even about sexual continence, but about social authority and the social order” (Cooper’s emphasis) (1996: 55).
69. Cooper argues, against Reardon, that the Greek romances and novels are about forming allegiances and perhaps the financial anxieties of the old families, who were losing ground but expected to remain patrons of the cities (1996: 38–40). Reardon, contra, stresses that, as the Mediterranean world of the novel becomes larger, the individuals in it become more absorbed in themselves (1989/2008: 6–7).

70. Jack Winkler's study, *Auctor & Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius's Golden Ass*, was the first to really bring this issue to readers' attention. Other studies of Apuleius have followed: Shumate 1996; Finkelpearl 1998; Harrison 2000, 2013; Bradley 2012; Lee, Finkelpearl, and Graverini 2014.

71. See on this episode Sessa 2005: 102–4.

72. We do not, however, have much evidence for the cult of Isis in Carthage or North Africa. See Rives 1995: 212; Wilhite 2017: 61.

73. Warner 2012: 362.

74. Dronke 1984: 285–6, n. 58. See also Bremmer 2004: 538, on the use of the word (and concept) *curiositas*.

75. Bradley 2012: 125. Bradley reviews the evidence adduced by Dronke on words and expressions shared by Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* and Perpetua's text and concludes that most are common or vague enough that we cannot claim any cross-textual correspondence on this basis (2012: 123–5).

76. For the Latinity of Apuleius, see Mattiacci 2014; for other aspects of his language, cultural context, and works, see Lee, Finkelpearl, and Graverini 2014.

77. Pervo 1994: 239. By “fiction,” Pervo means not “concoction” but “composition.”

78. This work goes by many names. It is also called the *Pseudo-Clementines* and is sometimes divided into the *Homilies* (in Greek) and *Recognitions* (in Latin). See Hägg 1983: 162–4; Bowersock 1994: 139–43; Bremmer 2010a. Bremmer (2010b) discusses the time, place, and authorship of the *Clementines* and says that we can only say that it was written before the mid-fourth century when the *Recognitions* appears in the *Doctrina Addai* (Bremmer 2010b: 1–9).

79. Hägg 1983: 162–3. But Czachesz disputes this, saying that, even though the *Clementines* share many motifs with the ancient novel, these motifs play a limited role in the overall narrative structure of the *Clementines*; also its long philosophical sections do not have an analogue in the ancient novel. He feels that the work is more appropriately related to certain ancient biographies (Czachesz 2010: 24–35).

80. See Scourfield (2018), who, in discussing Jerome *Letter* 1 and its relationship to the Greek novel, says “the gap between ideology and narrative which I will argue the text discloses may be seen as the consequence of the tenacious grip exerted by classical literary traditions even on a strident Christian dogmatist.”

81. Hägg 1983: 154.

Chapter 4

1. While I am not entirely comfortable with the use of the term “pagan” to refer to non-Christians, there does not seem a more suitable and appropriate term to use (see Jones 2014: 168, n. 10 for problems with using “polytheism” instead of “paganism”; cf. Rüpke 2014: 169–71, 185–6, on the history and use of the term “polytheist”). Two of the problems I find with the word pagan are that it has a negative resonance in the way we use it today which it did not necessarily have in antiquity, and that in its reference to all non-Christians, it does not distinguish among the many groups of people who were not Christians. Jones has a good discussion of the problems inherent in the use of the word pagan (which he does use, however) from his point of view. He says that the word pagan “usually denotes those who did not accept the Christian god” (although even that definition does not always work), but more generally it represented the Other or outsiders (2014: xiii; cf. p. 168, n. 11, where he cites an argument that “paganism” is “not

only a Christian concept but the outcome of a dialectical process between Christians and non-Christians”). Jones uses the term to refer to “the whole body of those non-Jews who remained outside Christianity, whether by choice or in ignorance” (7). The etymology of the word *paganus* (belonging to a *pagus*, village) remains unclear; it may refer to those who practice rural or older forms of religion (see Jones 2014: 5–7). Jones sums up his discussion by saying “who counted as a ‘pagan’ in antiquity cannot be determined merely from language, nor is a difference between pagans and Christians always observable in practice” (8). For good recent books on pagans and Christians (but on a slightly later period than my book covers), besides Jones 2014, see O’Donnell 2015; Watts 2015; Wilhite 2017. See also Salzman 2008: 187–9, who discusses using other terms like polytheist but comes down on the side of pagan as the least problematic term.

2. See Barnes 1971: 67 and n. 7; Salvian, *De Gubernatione Dei* 7.16.

3. Broughton says that “The Romans adapted themselves to Africa; they gave her peace, and made her prosperous, but they never made her Roman” (1929: 228). Rives has a somewhat different take on the Romanization of Carthage. In discussing the cult of Caelestis (= the Punic Tanit), he says that when the Romans colonized Carthage in the first century BCE, the old Punic city had been destroyed and the Romans reconfigured it, making into “no longer a Punic city but a Roman city, populated by Italians and with a constitution based on that of Rome” (1995: 162–3). This, however, is an earlier period than the one that Broughton describes.

4. See Wilhite 2017: 45–78, especially 47–8, 59–63.

5. See Mattiacci 2014: 87.

6. Mattiacci 2014: 87.

7. For the history of early Carthage, see Broughton 1929: 6ff. (and the ancient sources cited there); Rives 1995: 17ff. For the term “Punic,” and what it denotes, see Telmini et al. 2014: 113–47. They say, “the primarily chronological label ‘Punic,’ applied to Carthage from its foundation until its destruction in 146 BCE, also serves well as a cultural label for both Carthage and for the central and western Mediterranean areas from the sixth century BCE onwards” (146–7). See also on Punic and Phoenician identity and culture, Quinn and Vella 2014.

8. See Rives 1995: 18 and n. 4; he cites Cicero (who says that Scipio consecrated the soil, *De lege agr.* 1.2.5) and Appian (who says there were curses against those who might settle the site but the soil was not consecrated, *Pun.* 20.135). The story that the ground was sown with salt appears to be apocryphal and a later invention.

9. Cf. Broughton 1929: 13–19. Broughton often cites Gsell as the major source on North Africa (Stéphane Gsell, *Histoire ancienne de l’Afrique du Nord* [8 vols.], Paris: Hachette et Cie, 1913–1928).

10. Broughton says, “Rome had not entered Africa for purposes of commercial and agricultural expansion but to rid herself of a political rival . . . She had no thought of Romanizing or of exploiting the country” (1929: 18–19). Numidia was given land in recognition of Masinissa’s support during the Third Punic War.

11. App. *Pun.* 20.136. For histories of Carthage, see Raven 1969 (1993); Soren, Ben Khader, and Slim 1990; Rives 1995 (largely on the religious life and history of Carthage); Hoyos 2010.

12. See Rives 1995: 20; he cites the *Fontes Iuris Romani Antejustiniani* (ed. S. Riccobono, J. Baviera, C. Ferrini, J. Furlani, V. Arangio-Ruiz; 2nd ed., Florence: Barbera, 1940–1941), i.102–21.

13. See Rives 1995: 21 and n. 10; Broughton 1929: 47ff. Cf. Plut. *Caes.* 57.5; Pausanias 2.1.2; Strabo 17.3.15; Dio 43.50.3–5; App. *Pun.* 20.136. But Broughton says, “Caesar did

not have time to put any definitive scheme for the development of Africa into operation, if indeed he shaped one. The chief changes of the period seem to have happened spontaneously and in the time of Augustus" (1929: 68). See also Wightman 1980: 34ff., who summarizes the received view that, although Julius Caesar was the one who made the decision to recolonize Carthage, Augustus did the real work of recolonization after Actium in 31 BCE, choosing a site which overlaid the ancient Punic city and laying out the street grid. But Wightman proposes that it could have been Julius Caesar himself (or one of his surveyors) who chose the site and planned the regular grid (which used part of the old Punic orientation but with a Roman imprint of centuriation; 39–40).

14. The title *sufetes* is attested in Punic inscriptions and some Latin writers; Greek speakers used *basileis* (kings). See Hoyos 2010: 25–8. For Carthaginian coinage, see Hoyos 2010: 120–3; 209–10 (the monetary quality of Carthaginian coins was not high by the late third century, perhaps because they no longer needed to pay mercenaries and allies).

15. For further information on the buildings in Carthage, with good photographs, see Ben Khader, Soren, and Cooper 1987; Baratte 2012.

16. Apul. *Flor.* 20. 9–10.

17. Cf. Broughton 1929: 153 and n. 200 for a list of the municipal foundations.

18. Broughton 1929: 155–6, citing J. Toutain, *Les cultes païens dans l'empire romain* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1907). Broughton points out that the age of the Antonines marks the high point of significant municipalization and Romanization (p. 156). Cf. Hoyos 2010, who says that Augustine later claimed that the country dwellers near Hippo Regius still spoke Punic at home (220).

19. See here Pliny *NH* 5.24, who confirms this; Rives 1995: 23, who says that archaeological finds also confirm that the new city was built on the footprint of the old city.

20. This forum was one and a half times the size of both the fora of Caesar and Augustus in Rome together (see Rives 1995: 23). See also Lancel 1992: 151, 430.

21. See Bomgardner 1989: 85 (and n. 3), who cites the geographer Pomponius Mela, writing in the first century CE in the time of Claudius. Pomponius attests that "Carthage had regained her former prosperity."

22. For stunning photographs of both Carthage and other cities in North Africa, see Baratte 2012.

23. See Rives 1995: 27–8.

24. According to the *Passio* (7.9), the Christian prisoners were transferred to a military prison (*carcerem castrensem*) the day before their scheduled execution. Some have extrapolated from this that there were two amphitheatres, the main (civilian) one and a military amphitheater (*amphitheatrum castrense*), which has not been located. See Bomgardner 1989: 88–9 and n. 21.

25. See Soren, Ben Khader, and Slim 1990, esp. 197 (latrines); for the monuments, see Georg Schöllgen, *Ecclesia Sordida? Zur Frage des sozialen Schichtung frühchristlicher Gemeinden am Beispiel Karthagos zur Zeit Tertullians* (Munich: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1984), esp. 53–70.

26. For details of the evidence, see Bomgardner 1989. He cites a twelfth-century geographer, al-Idrisi, who describes in detail a building that is thought to be the amphitheater (which he calls a "Thiater").

27. Bomgardner 1989: 102.

28. For a detailed archaeological study of the tophet or the Sanctuary of Tanit at Carthage, see Hurst 1999. He defines tophet (a biblical term) as referring in this context to Punic sacrificial sites such as the Sanctuary of Tanit in Carthage (10, n. 5). Hurst and his collaborators (Z. Ben Abdallah, M. G. Fulford, and S. Henson) argue that, until

Christianity replaced the cults of gods worshipped in Carthage, there was continuity between the Punic and Roman cults and thus a “crucial link” between the two civilizations (9). They thus emphasize the Punic and African origins of these gods and cults. They believe that it is more correct to see the goddesses Tanit and Juno Caelestis as one goddess, rather than the Rome-centered view that sees Juno subsuming Tanit.

29. For the lamentable lack of evidence and an excellent description of the various excavations, see Lancel 1995: 227–56. On human sacrifice in Carthage, see also Shaw 2011: 588. He says that, “Africans already had a pervasive cult of human blood sacrifice that had been deeply embedded in memory and practice for nearly a millennium, and maybe more” by the time that Christianity came to Africa. Such human sacrifices were made to Baal and then later to Saturn under Roman rule. Shaw also says that there was perhaps a shift from human sacrifice to animal substitutes as time went on.

30. Rives believes that the evidence points to at least some of the children having been sacrificed (2007: 72–3). But by the end of the first century BCE, the practice seems to have died out, and animals were sacrificed in place of children.

31. Lancel 1995: 249.

32. For an examination of child sacrifice in Carthage, see Brown 1991. She believes that child sacrifice was a “highly tenacious religious practice” that survived until the destruction of Carthage by the Romans in 146 BCE and survived in other parts of Africa until the third century CE (13; she cites Tert. *Apol.* 9.2–4 for evidence of the persistence of this ritual, 177, n. 1).

33. Lancel 1995: 252–3, citing archaeological data.

34. See Brown 1991: 175–6 for unanswered questions about the ritual of child sacrifice.

35. Birley 1971/1988/1999: xi. His statement that he altered the title in the 1988 edition is made in a “Note to the Paperback Edition” (p. xi). Nonetheless the paperback version of 1999 still carries the original title with “the African Emperor” last, not first.

36. Birley 1999: xi.

37. Birley 1999: xi.

38. See Levick 2007: 26 and the bibliography cited in n. 23 for the dispute over the Africanness of Septimius Severus. Many coins struck during the reign of Severus feature lions, which commemorate his African origins. See Smith 2014: 236–7 (and 237, n. 33, for a list of some of these coins).

39. Lepcis Magna is also called Leptis Magna.

40. For a family tree of the Septimii and their relations, see Birley 1999 (1971): 216–17. The textual and epigraphic evidence for the family is found in Birley 1999 (1971): 212–20 (for Septimii and Punic ancestors); 220–6 for the Fulvii of Lepcis (Septimius’ maternal relations, who had come from Italy to Lepcis and intermarried with local people) and the Julii of Emesa (the family of Septimius’ wife, Julia Domna). Information on the first known ancestor of Septimius Severus is found on p. 220, #26.

41. *HA Sev.* 1.5; cf. Levick 2007: 27ff. Our sources for this period of Roman history (second–third centuries CE) are not trustworthy and contradict each other. We mostly rely on Dio (contemporary with Septimius Severus; see Kemezis 2014 for an assessment of Dio’s narrative modes and ways of viewing emperors) and the *Historia Augusta* (=HA), which is a later compilation and often has little credibility.

42. For details on the life and background of Septimius Severus, his family, and his career and references to the few sources we have, see Platnauer 1918; Birley 1999 (1971); Levick 2007.

43. For this and all aspects of Julia Domna’s life, see Levick 2007; Langford 2013. Julia was the daughter of a high priest of Elagabal, Julius Bassianus, but he was of

nonsenatorial rank (see Birley 1999 [1971]: 72). Julia certainly spoke Greek and probably Aramaic; her knowledge of Latin is less certain.

44. For Julia's titles such as *Mater Castrorum*, see Langford 2013: 23–38; 134–6.

45. The date of Septimius Severus' visit to Lepcis Magna is not clear, and the evidence for it is vague. The date 203 CE is largely based on *di patrii* coins struck during that period that allude to Septimius Severus' "*indulgentia*" to Carthage. See Rowan 2012: 77–84; Langford 2013: Appendices A and B (125–33). See also Sears 2013: 201; 213, n. 3.

46. For work on the Severan buildings in Lepcis and inscriptions from the Severan period in Africa (and their domination into a much later period), see Birley 1993: 45–6, 51 (he puts the visit to Africa in 202 CE); Sears 2013: 201–16.

47. See Birley 1999 (1971): 153–4. It is likely that Septimius Severus was still in Africa at this time, perhaps in the Saharan desert.

48. For details of the large number of buildings erected under the reign of Septimius Severus in Rome, particularly between 195 and 204, see Lusnia 2014.

49. For the story of Geta's death, see Dio 78.2.3; Herodian 4.4.3.

50. We are told by Dio that Caracalla gave his mother charge of his Greek and Latin correspondence (Dio 78.18.2; 79.4.2–3).

51. For her suicide, see Dio 79.23.6; Herodian 4.13.8.

52. On the "adoption," see Smith 2014: 239–40. See Birley 1999 (1971): 189 for the name Caracalla; Levick 2007: 43 for the name change.

53. Levick 2007: 32, 86, 88.

54. See, e.g., the Berlin tondo, with Septimius Severus, his wife, and Caracalla. Geta was originally represented too, but his portrait was removed. See Levick 2007: plate 8 (between pp. 86 and 87); p. 91.

55. See Dio 77.17.2; *HA Sev.* 1.4, 18.5; also Birley 1999 (1971): 34–6; Levick 2007: 27–8.

56. *Epitome de Caesaribus* 20.8, cited by Birley 1999 (1971): 35.

57. Birley says "the 'African accent' was a provincial Roman accent, not a foreign accent" (1999 [1971]: 35).

58. *HA Sev.* 15.7; Birley 1999 (1971): 35; 131ff.; 213–14, #8; Levick 2007: 27–8.

59. Dio 78.18.2; Hemelrijk 1999: 125 and 305, n. 125.

60. See Hemelrijk 1999: 122–6.

61. Hemelrijk 1999: 122; 305, n. 121; Levick 2007: 107–23. For the two Faustinas, see Levick 2014.

62. On Julia Domna and her knowledge of Christianity, see Levick 2007: 121–2. She and Septimius Severus had been based at Lugdunum (Lyons, Gaul) only about a decade after a group of Christians had been attacked and martyred there in 177 CE, so she must have known and heard about that episode.

63. Whether Perpetua was originally from Thuburbo Minus or Carthage, the conditions in which she grew up would have been very similar.

64. We need to be cautious in our definition of what "religion" means in these various contexts. As Rives points out, Greco-Roman religion was not a religion but "a set of approaches to the divine"; these cults did not for the most part have elements that mark the monotheistic religions: religious authority, sacred scriptures, belief as fundamental to their religious life, and a strong connection between religion and morality (Rives 2007: 13–53; quote p. 43).

65. See Barnes 1971: 60–3, 262–3. Barnes gives the transcript of the trial (or what appears to be part of it) on pp. 60–2. It is not known where Scilli or Scillium was. Cf. also Robinson 1891 (2004): 106–21; he gives the full text in Latin and Greek.

66. See Rives 1995: 223–4.

67. See Rives 1995: 224–5 on the presence of Christianity from about 150 CE and its rapid spread.

68. See Rives 2007: 71–3 for a discussion of some of the gods whose names are found in Carthage; some of these (Neptune, Pluto) sound like Greco-Roman gods but were in fact local deities.

69. See Rives 1995: 142–50 on Saturn, his cults, and his worshippers. Rives calls the cult of Saturn “the most important regional cult in Roman Africa” (142).

70. See Rives 1995: 186–93; 2007: 54–88, esp. 71–3.

71. Rives 1995: 188–90 (inscription is from CIL 999).

72. Rives 1995: 189.

73. Saturn, known to the Greeks as Kronos, was an ancient god of agriculture and fertility among the Italo-Latins. In Africa, Roman colonists associated Saturn with and assimilated him to the god Baal-Hammon, a god brought from the East who was worshipped in Carthage and other North African cities. For the cult of Saturn and other native gods in Carthage, see Rives 1995: 132–69; 2007: 72–3.

74. For the cult of Ceres or Cereres in Africa, see Rives 1995: 157–61; 2007: 72.

75. Rives 1995: 154. Cf. Marcel LeGlay, *Saturne Africain: Monuments*. 2 vols. (Paris: Arts et Métiers Graphiques, 1961–1966), vol. 1 (1961): 15 #4: *Domino Baali votum quod vovit/CREScens; exaudivit vocem eius, fortunavit (eum)* (the Latin translation given here for the Punic).

76. Rives 1995: 154.

77. See Rives 1995: 158–9, 161–2, for an explanation of this complex transformation of Roman African religion and culture.

78. See on this Barnes 1971: 85–114, esp. 87–8; Tert. *Apol.* 35.1–5.

79. See Barnes 1971: 88–9. Tertullian declares that the pagans even defile the Christian dead (*Apol.* 37.2).

80. Rives 1995: 230–4.

81. See Rives 2007, esp. 105–31.

82. Rives 1995: 192–3, 234. I say more about this in Chapter 5.

83. For the wide range of religious choices available to the people of Carthage, see Rives 1995: 192–3, 234; 2007: 71–3. Even though Christians did belong to a community, their choice not to participate in public cults meant that they were not part of the wider community that was accessed through these cults.

84. See Rives 1995: 242, 248–9, and in general 173–249 (“The Failure of the Civic Model”); 2007: 105–31.

85. Rives 1995: 249.

86. See Barnes 1971: 105 and nn. 9–12 for the passages in Tertullian. Most are from *Ad Nationes*.

87. Brown 2000: 325.

Chapter 5

1. For recent books on religion in the Roman empire, in Africa, and religion as a concept, see Rives 2007; Nongbri 2013; Wilhite 2017.

2. Rives uses the term religion as a lens but cautions that his book is a study not of “the religions (plural) of the Roman Empire” but rather of “religion (singular) in the Roman Empire” since there were so many shared practices and it is hard to isolate

different religions except perhaps for Christianity and Judaism (2007: 4–7). Nongbri says that we cannot use the term “religion” because it involves certain “theological assumptions that have the capacity to distort” materials and texts we are studying (quote from review of Nongbri by David T. M. Frankfurter in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 23 [2015], 633). Nongbri claims that “religion is a modern innovation”; it is not a natural or universal idea (2013: 16, 154.); he suggests that we not regard religion as a first-order but a second-order concept (158–9).

3. See Rives 2007: 209.

4. For a good discussion of the necessity to discuss religion in the wider context of “social, imperial, and political history,” see Elm 2014: 15–31 (quote from p. 15).

5. See Markus 1972, especially 22–4; Clark 2004: 12–14. Clark says, “The study of late antiquity needs classicists and medievalists, historians and art historians, anthropologists and archaeologists, theologians and legal historians, papyrologists and epigraphers” (14).

6. See Rives 2007: 105–31.

7. See Elm 2014: 15–31.

8. Rives 1995: 245; 2007: 4–7; 13–53; 158–81.

9. Clark 2004: 14–15. See also Rebillard 2012, whose book title reveals his approach to early Christians in North Africa: *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE*. Rebillard mentions some older paradigms that we need to avoid adopting, for example, the idea of “semi-Christians” (those who did not embrace all aspects of Christianity), or *incerti*, or Cameron’s five categories of Christian, ranging from committed pagan to committed Christian (Rebillard 2012: 94–6). See, on aspects of religion in the Roman empire (Rome and the provinces), Rüpke 2014, especially Chapters 5 (105–12) and 10 (185–209), on “Religious Pluralism and the Roman Empire,” about the lack of a conception of “religions” in the plural in the early empire; and now Rebillard and Rüpke 2015, on group identity and religious individuality in late antiquity, especially Chapter 6 (J. Perkins, on “Asserting Christian Identity”).

10. For the term “Christianness,” see Rebillard 2012.

11. Rebillard 2012: 92–3 and passim; Rebillard 2014.

12. See here Jacobsen 2011: 105–34.

13. See Jacobsen 2011: 134 on Tertullian. He stresses that Tertullian “felt it necessary to create boundaries between ‘them’ and ‘us’ in order to make it possible for Christians to live in the world, but not according to the world.”

14. See Rebillard 2012: 9–33; he cautions that we should not think that Tertullian believed that Christians belonged to a separate world.

15. *Ep. to Diognetus* 5.1–5. See on this anonymous work Foster 2007: 162–8; for the Greek text and translation, see Ehrman 2003: vol. 2, 122–59.

16. MacMullen 1986: 338.

17. See O’Donnell 2015: 5 (“for the most part, what happened in Antioch stayed in Antioch”).

18. Shaw points to the “anywhereness of the new religion.” The first Christians known to have been arrested were in a small rural town of Scilli (location unknown) in Africa (Shaw 2011: 589).

19. Frend says, “Christianity does not appear to have prospered in Africa before the second half of the second century A.D.” (1952: 87). See Wilhite 2017: 79–107; he says there was almost certainly a Christian presence in Africa by 150 CE (79).

20. See Burns and Jensen on this. They suggest that Christianity might have come to Carthage and Africa from Italy, but also maintain that the African church was quite independent of the Roman church (2014: 3–4).

21. Tertullian says in *Praescr. Haer.* 36.4: “videamus quid didicerit, quid docuerit, cum Africanis quoque ecclesiis contestetur” (or *contesseratur* or *contesserarit*) [“Let us see what she learned, what she taught, what common witness to the faith is shared by Rome and Africa”] (or “what bond of friendship she had with the churches of Africa”; *contesseratur* or *contesserarit* are alternative readings here). The alternative reading could support the idea that Christianity originated in Rome. See Greenslade 1977: 57. See also on this Rives 1995: 225. Frend believes that Christianity came to Africa through Rome, but he admits that the origins of Christianity in Carthage are obscure (1952: 87 and n. 1). See also Telfer 1961: 512–17, who does not believe that African Christianity came from Rome (it did not “stand in a filial relationship to the Church of Rome,” 513). Indeed Telfer thinks that African Christianity may have influenced the church at Rome and sent a group to Rome (515–16).

22. Eus. *HE* 5.1

23. There is also a Greek manuscript of the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (see Chapter 1 of this book); the style in this manuscript varies, and Saturus’ vision in *Passio* 11–13 is unlike the rest of the work. Some critics think that his vision was written in Greek (Barnes 1971: 265–6 and 266, n. 1).

24. *De Baptismo*, *De Spectaculis*, and *De Virginibus Velandis*; see Barnes 1971: 68–9. The earliest documents down to the mid-second century are in Greek (for example, The Letters of Paul, *First Clement* and *Second Clement*, The Letters of Ignatius, The Shepherd of Hermas); see for most of these, Ehrman 2003; Holmes 2007.

25. See here Rives (1995: 226 and n. 116); he cites (but does not agree with) Quispel’s theories (G. Quispel, “African Christianity Before Minucius Felix and Tertullian,” in J. den Boeft and A. H. M. Kessels, eds., *Actus: Studies in Honour of H. L. W. Nelson* [Utrecht, Netherlands: Instituut voor Klassieke Talen, 1982: 257–335]). See also Frend, who says that Christianity could have come to Carthage “step by step” by way of the Jewish colonies in the coastal towns of Tripolitania and Tunisia (1952: 87).

26. Telfer 1961: 516–17.

27. See MacMullen 1984: 74–85, 116–17 for the “confusion of conduct,” the blending of Christian and pagan views and behaviors. See also on the competition between secular and sacred, between Christian and pagan, two articles in Engels and Van Nuffelen 2014: Ine Jacobs, “A Time for Prayer and a Time for Pleasure: Christianity’s Struggle with the Secular World” (pp. 192–219) and Aude Busine, “The Conquest of the Past: Christian Attitudes Towards Civic History” (pp. 220–36).

28. See for the use of “social scientific theories to reconstruct history in the absence of adequate information on what actually occurred,” Stark 1996: 3, and *passim*. Stark’s work has not been universally well received; see, for example, Castelli 1998, who, although she applauds his attempt “to explain the spread of Christianity through recourse to rational explanation rather than *deus ex machina* argumentation” (229), takes issue both with his generalizing claims about (*inter alia*) “paganism,” “Christianity,” “women,” and the “Greco-Roman world,” and with his assertions about the role of women in the expansion of Christianity in his Chapter 5 (“The Role of Women in Christian Growth”). There is simply not enough evidence to back up any claims about the roles of women as evangelizing or as bearing more children than non-Christian women. Castelli’s article provides a great deal of the bibliography (up to 1998) on women’s participation in early Christianity (see especially notes 2–3).

29. Stark 1996: 5; Hopkins 1998: 187, citing acts 21:20, which claims that “tens of thousands of Jews have believed” (the Revised English Bible translates the Greek word *muriades* here [= “tens of thousands”] as “thousands”); p.189, citing Pliny *Ep.* 10.96; p. 190, citing Tert. *Scap.* 2.10: “in spite of our huge numbers, almost a majority in every city.”

30. Hopkins 1998: 185. Hopkins points out that, to make matters more complicated, the term “Christian” would not have been used by everyone to denote the same entity. A person designated as such by an ancient Christian writer might not have been identified as such (or wholly as such); Hopkins 1998: 186–7.

31. Cf. Stark 1996 (whose work Hopkins gratefully acknowledges). Stark gives similar numbers (7), basing his estimates on an overall population of 60 million people, and he gives percentages of the population that these figures suggest. So, for example, in 40 CE, 1,000 Christians would = 0.0017% of the total population, and in 350 CE, just over 33 million Christians would = 56.5% of the population.

32. The number of Jews was, by comparison, much larger than the number of Christians until at least the late third century CE (see Hopkins 1998: 225–6).

33. See Hopkins 1998: 222–5 for this theory.

34. See Hopkins 1998: 195: “As I see it, the image of persistent persecution which Christians manufactured for themselves was more a mode of self-representation or a tactic of self-unification than an objective description of reality.” Persecutions certainly happened, Hopkins says, but sporadically. On this see Moss 2013 (who agrees).

35. Adolf Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, trans. J. Moffatt, 2 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1908); MacMullen 1984: 29. We may also discard the opposing theories set forth by Christian authors and anti-Christian authors. Christian authors claimed that Christianity grew because it offered the one true doctrine and overcame the boundaries of gender, class, and ethnicity by offering God’s love to everyone. Anti-Christian authors replied that the Christians made headway by appealing to the uneducated and the vulnerable, using tactics of fear and appealing to fanatics. See Clark 2004: 13–15.

36. Eus. *HE* 3.37.3; Stark 1996: 13–27.

37. See Stark 1996: 14.

38. MacMullen 1984: 29. MacMullen advises combining “evangelizing in private settings” with successes en masse to explain the rate of expansion of Christianity.

39. Stark 1996: 18.

40. Stark 1996: 16–17. Cf. here Bremmer 2014, who also argues for conversions being mediated through other Christians in the apocryphal acts.

41. See Stark 1996: 56–7.

42. See Eus. *HE* 5.1; Rives 1995: 225.

43. We do, however, have many letters written from one community to another; this supports the idea that the widespread Christian communities maintained connections with each other (for example, in addition to the letter from the Christians in Lyons [Lugdunum] and Vienne to churches in Asia and Phrygia, we have the Letters of Paul, Letters of Ignatius, *First Clement*).

44. See Clark 2004: 14–15.

45. See Rives 2011 on the concern of later emperors like Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian for maintaining the unity and the community of the empire by enforcing such traditional forms of behavior.

46. See Barnes 1971: 62, 63 and n. 1; both the name and the location of the town are uncertain. See also Ruggiero 1991; Wilhite 2017: 85–7.

47. See Shaw 2011: 589–91; he describes Scilli as “a nothing of a place about 100 miles up the Bagrada Valley from Carthage” on the borders of Numidia (589). Barnes (1971: 60–3) puts the town much closer to Carthage.

48. Tert. *Scap.* 3.4.

49. Barnes says, “neither Tertullian nor his readers . . . possessed any precise knowledge of how Christianity came to Africa” (1971: 67).

50. See Shaw 2011: 589 and n. 8. Shaw, citing Ruggiero’s edition of the acts of the Scillitan Martyrs, says that the number assigned to the group of martyrs could have been created by later hagiographical manipulation to match the number of the apostles. See Ruggiero 1991.

51. Rives 1995: 225.

52. Apul. *Met.* 9.14; Barnes 1971: 60, 272–3.

53. See Stark 1996: 7.

54. See Markus 1972, especially p. 29; also Stark’s figures for the period 250–300, which underscore that this was a period of great growth (Stark 1996: 7).

55. Shaw believes that it started in a rural area quite far from Carthage and then moved from the hinterland to larger towns (2011: 589). Barnes seems to believe the reverse: that Christianity penetrated into the African countryside from more urban areas (1971: 62). See also Brown 1968: 95 (“Christianity won, in the west, as elsewhere in the Roman world, because it won the battle for the towns”); Rives 1995: 224.

56. See Rebillard 2012: 7.

57. Tert. *Scap.* 5.2; Rives 1995: 224.

58. See Barnes 1971: 38 for the dating of the *Ad Scapulam* (late summer or early autumn of 212 CE).

59. Tert. *Apol.* 39.1–6; cf. Gwynn 2015: 6–7.

60. See Rives 1995: 226–7.

61. Rives 1995: 282–3.

62. See Hopkins 1998: 186; Aug. *De haeresibus ad Quodvultdeum* (a work addressed in 428–429 CE to Quodvultdeus, later bishop of Carthage, who had requested that Augustine write a treatise on heresies for the use of the clergy. The table of contents of *De haeresibus* lists eighty-eight heresies (the Introduction to *The Works of Saint Augustine* lists only eighty-three: John Rotelle, ed. *The Works of Saint Augustine*, pt. 1, vol. 18: *Arianism and Other Heresies*, trans. Roland Teske [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995], 15); Rebillard 2012.

63. Hopkins 1998: 186. He says, “it was only in a limited number of cases or contexts in ancient society that religious affinity was a critical indicator of cultural identity” (187).

64. See MacMullen, who says, “bishops from Eusebius to Augustine thus report on new members who went through the motions and talked like Christians on some occasions but not all, and therefore were changed in their behavior, though incompletely” (1984: 115–16). See Merdinger 1997: 12–13 for pagan attacks on Christians.

65. Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5.61–3, cited by Rives 1995: 227.

66. *Passio* 2.1. White says that, in the time of Paul, there may have been six or more houses in Corinth used for such meetings by Christian groups (1990: 105); see Hopkins 1998: 200–1.

67. Dura-Europos was a Hellenistic, Parthian, and Roman border city on the banks of the Euphrates River, in today’s Syria. It was a very important archaeological site

because, after it was abandoned in 256–7 CE, nothing was built over it to obscure its architectural features. See White 1990: 120–1; Stark 1996: 8; Clark 2004: 7, 28.

68. Tert. *Scap.* 3.1. See Barnes 1971: 88–9, 273–4 (where he refutes the idea that Christians earlier had used the Jewish cemetery at Carthage).

69. Rebillard 2012: 16–17 (and his earlier article cited there).

70. See Lane Fox 1986: 21–3 and n. 22 (p. 684), Hurtado 2016.

71. For this term, see Rebillard 2012: 7, 9–33, 92–7. See Rebillard's book in general for the issues of identity and "groupness."

72. Rebillard 2012: 7.

73. See, for a good explication of what made Christianity so distinct and a religion that its followers were willing to become adherents of at the cost of social ostracism and even, in some cases, death, Hurtado 2016. He says that "early Christianity represented a new kind of what we would call 'religion', something that had not quite been seen before, and something that proved revolutionary in what 'religion' came to mean thereafter" (76). Cf. also Rives' statement that "In the end we must acknowledge that Christianity represented something genuinely novel, if not absolutely *sui generis* . . . a development that ultimately entailed the fundamental transformation of that world" (Rives 2005: 41, cited by Hurtado 2016: 226, n. 88).

74. See *Ep. to Diognetus* 5.1–2.

75. Hopkins 1998: 186. To put it another way, we might also say that such identities are a discursive construct rather than a fact of social experience. Cf. Perkins 2009b: 17–44, and *passim*.

76. Rebillard 2012: 92. See also Brown, who sees Christianity as part of a common Mediterranean culture (1968: 85–95); MacMullen 1984: 114.

77. Hilarius can probably be identified with P. Aelius Hilarius, a procurator who, while serving in Spain in the early 190s, dedicated an altar to "the gods and goddesses to whom it is meet and lawful to pray" (*dis deabusque quos ius fasque est precari*). He seems thus to have been a conservatively religious and pious person who would not have countenanced the new religion of Christianity. See *Passio* 6.3–6; Barnes 1971: 163 (who calls Hilarius "an austere man of unbending loyalty to traditional religion"); Rives 1995: 244–5; Rives 1996; Heffernan 2012: 49–50;

78. See Barnes 1971: 152–3; Rives 1995: 242–3.

79. See the traditional question and answer at trials: "*Christiana es?*" "*Christiana sum*" (*Passio* 6.4).

80. See Barnes 1971: 143–63.

81. See Rives (1995: 243; 2009), who believes there were no general prohibitions coming from emperors; Keresztes 1989, who argues that there was such a law, probably under Nero (vol. 1, 72–80, 103–20); Keresztes 1970: 565–78, for persecutions under Septimius Severus. Eusebius says that Severus was stirring up persecutions in the tenth year of his reign (203 CE; *HE* 6.1.1–2). Barnes makes a strong case against there being a "single Roman policy towards foreign cults which was unambiguous and unchanging" (1968: 50). He also argues against the scanty evidence in *HA* 17.1 that Septimius Severus forbade anyone to become Christian or to convert to Christianity (or Judaism); he calls this an "undubitable fiction" (p. 40).

82. See Rives 2009: 200–1 on such outbreaks of mass violence.

83. So *HA Sev.* 17.1: *Iudaeos fieri sub gravi poena vetuit. Idem etiam de Christianis sanxit*. But this source is unreliable (cf. Birley 1971: 135; 250, n. 12).

84. See Birley 1993: 43–5 and 59, n. 48. Birley lists several lenient governors whom Tertullian gives as examples of those who gave light punishments to Christians or released them (Tert. *Scap.* 4).

85. Barnes 1971: 143. Barnes says further, “If it was the governor alone who decided how to treat Christians, . . . the attitude of the reigning emperor cannot legitimately be inferred from the actions of provincial governors” (149).

86. See Rives 2011 on how and why Roman officials took action against Christians in what he identifies as the second and third phases of Christianity (from Nero down to Decius in 250 CE, and then from Decius to Diocletian in the early fourth century). He says that the main opposition to Christians was fueled by local concerns (210).

87. See Rives 1995: 245; he points out that, while Carthage may have defined “more sharply the local religious identity of its city,” the collective religious identity of the city was less well defined than the religious identity of republican Rome and the city did not “enforce individual conformity to that group norm.” Rives would argue that Decius’ policy was not meant to set in motion the first empire-wide persecution of Christians but to “define a minimum cultic obligation for membership in the wider community of the Roman empire” (2011: 211).

88. See Rives 2011: 212–16.

89. On the later period (fourth century and beyond), see MacMullen 1986; Shaw 2011.

90. Shaw 2011: 771.

91. See Rebillard 2012: 9–33; he cites Barnes’ work on Tertullian (Rebillard 2012: 9).

92. Elm 2014: 31.

Chapter 6

1. The Greek manuscript says that the group was from Thuburbo Minus. See Robinson 1891: 22–6 (who dismissed Thuburbo Minus for solid reasons and suggests that it is a fiction made up at a later time); Ameling, who accepts it (2012: 81–2). The Latin manuscripts give no locality.

2. *Passio* 2.1, where the editor says that Perpetua was *matronaliter nupta* (“married in a respectable fashion”), certainly indicates that she had a husband. But there are those who think that this may be a later addition by an editor and that Perpetua might not have been married (see Amat 1996: 30–1, 266; Cooper 2011: 685–702).

3. See on the literary and rhetorical aspects of the *Passio*, especially of Perpetua’s part of the narrative, Amat 1996; Ronsse 2006; Bremmer and Formisano 2012b *passim*.

4. Dova argues that Perpetua’s role as mother was a preparation for and foreshadows her role as martyr (2017).

5. I must caution that many scholars see the *Passio* as a rhetorical construction and not a dependable source of historical information. See, e.g., Ronsse 2006; Kraemer 2008; Perkins 2009a: 159–71.

6. Shaw 2004/1993: 293. Shaw, in a personal communication with me (email of November 11, 2009) explains this by saying: “I read the ‘*circiter*’ here as meaning ‘almost’ or ‘nearly’ (in the sense of ‘not quite’)—a sense that I remember finding in not a few of the Latin Christian texts that I was reading at the time—but, admittedly, it could be read to mean simply ‘about’ with some variability—so ‘about 21’ is perfectly fine.”

7. See Barnes 1971: 70 and n. 7 for a list of the proconsuls.

8. It is also possible that her family could have immigrated to Carthage from Rome.

9. Shaw 2004/1993: 292. See also Ameling 2012: 81–4, who agrees that she was from Thuburbo Minus and not Carthage. Barnes says firmly that she was from Carthage (1971: 70).

10. See Ameling 2012: 82. Shaw (2004 [1993]: 292, note 29) argues that their citizenship could have come from a Vibius who was governor long before or from Roman soldiers who settled the area around Thuburbo Minus.

11. See Amat 1996: 193–4 on *Passio* 2.1. She remarks that the words used here are in the style of an epitaph. She takes *honeste nata* to indicate that Perpetua's family was of prominent provincial status and comments that *honeste* would certainly indicate an honorable status. Barnes says that the language used of Perpetua in *Passio* 2.1 (*honeste nata, liberaliter instituta, matronaliter nupta*) “comes close to indicating senatorial rank” (1971: 70). At least, he says, even if her family was not of senatorial rank, the standing of her family “was no humble one.”

12. For bibliography on the meaning of *honestus*, see Ameling 2012: 83, n. 25. Though many scholars take it to designate people who had equestrian status or who belonged to the municipal aristocracy, eleven inscriptions from Africa that contain terms like *honesta matrona* or *honesta femina* seem to indicate that the term could be used of people belonging to a much broader range of social ranks such as military wives. The authors of the article on these inscriptions suggest that, if people did want to make clear their equestrian status, they might want to use a paraphrase such as *egregiae memoriae viri filia*. See Z. Benzina-Ben-Abdallah and L. Ladjimi Sabai, “Egregiae memoriae filia? À propos d’une inscription inédite d’Haidra (Tunisie),” *Antiquités Africaine* 11 (1977): 161–5 (cited by Ameling 2012: 83, n. 25). Kitzler thinks that the name Vibia indicates comparatively high social status, but thinks it improbable that Perpetua and her family belonged to the *honestiores* (2007: 7, n. 18). He cites Schöllgen 1984 on this question (especially 197–202). See also Heffernan, who takes *honeste* to mean that Perpetua belonged to the *honestiores* and was thus of a higher social class than the others arrested with her, who belonged to the *humiliores*. She at the very least was “a member of the *decuriones*, or less likely the *equites*” (2012: 150). Heffernan too notes the inconsistencies of assuming this rank and the penalties meted out both to Perpetua (condemned to the beasts) and to her father (beaten in *Passio* 6.5).

13. See Ameling 2012: 83 and nn. 23–4 on Hilarianus and the law against using corporal punishment on *decuriones*.

14. Cooper 2011: 685–702, especially 688–90, 695.

15. Cooper 2011: 686. In later versions of the story (in the *Acta*), Perpetua does have a husband. See Halporn 1991: 228–9; Amat 1996: 30–1, 266. Amat suggests that a later editor of the *Acta* added the husband because he was disturbed by the husband's unexplained absence.

16. A further puzzling detail clarified by this reading, according to Cooper, is that Perpetua is housed initially in a dank and dark prison, which seems “by no means appropriate to a person of rank” (2011: 692).

17. On her aunt (her mother's sister), see Heffernan 2012: 188–9; she would have been almost a surrogate mother to Perpetua.

18. See Halporn 1991: 228–9.

19. *Passio* 3, 5, 6, 9.

20. See Cobb 2008: 97–102 on the comportment of Perpetua's father and his diminished masculinity when he loses his self-control.

21. Cobb 2008: 99. She speculates here on whether ancient authors would expect their readers to visualize action in a scene that they are reading; she cites John Chrysostom and Augustine to prove that this expectation was there (2008: 98–9).

22. See Cobb 2008: 101–2; 175–6, nn. 44–48 on the importance of bodily hair as a symbol of masculinity. She cites Gleason (1995: 68), who says that hairiness is the “mark of a manly nature” and the beard “the distinctive mark of a man.”

23. Cobb (2008: 102) says that the demasculinization of Perpetua’s father is “reflected in his emotionality, his abandonment of paternal authority, his use of deceptive persuasion, and his old age.”

24. See Shaw 2004/1993: 304–5 for a different reading of this statement.

25. On the traditional Roman family structure and Perpetua’s rejection of it, see Bradley 2012:104–25. As Bradley puts it, “for all the father’s devotion . . . tragedy in Perpetua’s family could not be averted: parents lost a child, brothers their sister, an aunt her niece, an infant son his mother” (119–20). Bradley views the actions of Perpetua and Felicitas in the face of their motherhood and pregnancy as evidence of their Christian fanaticism, and he says about claims of Felicitas’ desire to achieve martyrdom and her rejoicing in the early birth of her child so that she could be among the martyrs, “a greater perversion of nature it is difficult to imagine” (121). See also Tilley 1994 for Perpetua’s shift from dependence to independence, from daughter to *domina* (841).

26. Shaw 2004/1993: 304–5.

27. Cf. Amat 1996: 266; she discusses the later version of Perpetua’s story in the *Acta* where the husband does appear, because, she says, his absence had surprised the editor. Cf. Praet 2003: 466–7.

28. Shaw 2004/1993: 304–5; cf. 305, n.55, where Shaw explains that such a “cross or parallel cousin marriage” would not be atypical.

29. See here Osiek 2002: 287–8. She says that Perpetua’s father, the maternal grandfather, could exercise authority over the baby only if “there were no father or father’s family to claim the child, or if they were too afraid or too ashamed to do so” (288). If Shaw is right, Perpetua’s father could claim the child since the husband was part of his family.

30. Osiek 2002.

31. *Passio* 14 begins with these words: “these were the most glorious visions of the blessed martyrs themselves, Saturus and Perpetua, visions which they wrote down themselves.”

32. Cooper 2011.

33. See Castelli 2008; Willem van Henten 2012: 129–30.

34. Cf. Amat 1996: 31. Perhaps therefore he was taken out of the story by later editors; see Sigismund-Nielsen 2012: 107.

35. Praet suggests that Perpetua’s husband had fled a dangerous situation, leaving both his wife and child (2003: 468). Other possibilities that have been floated: Perpetua’s husband was away when she was arrested (Tilley 1994: 843); Perpetua’s husband had died (Bremmer 2002: 88, although, as he points out, Perpetua is called *nupta* in *Passio* 2.1 and not *vidua* or *nupta viduata*; cf. Dronke 1984: 282). For a list of many possibilities of what might have happened to the husband, see Dronke 1984: 282–3; Praet 2003: 465–8.

36. For *Acta* I and II (called A and B by van Beek), see Amat 1996: 278–303. The questioning about the husband of Felicitas appears in *Acta* I.5; Perpetua’s husband is mentioned in *Acta* I.6.

37. Shaw 2004/1993: 312–14.

38. Bradley is dubious about whether questions about family were asked only of women. He points out that in the trials of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonice, Papyrus was

also asked about children; Irenaeus and Phileas were asked about wives and children (Bradley 2012: 114–15).

39. See Halporn 1991: 240, n. 31: “The notion that she is a slave is doubtful, and she is certainly not Perpetua’s servant.” See also Osiek, who remarks that, despite lack of evidence in the *Passio*, “popular tradition persists that Felicitas was Perpetua’s slave” (2002: 287, n. 2). Amat (1996: 35) says that there is no evidence that Felicitas was a slave of Perpetua. In an early article on Felicitas, Poirier denies that there is any ancient evidence that Felicitas was a slave and calls this a modern interpretation (1970: 308). Poirier also mentions that, among ancient authors, neither Augustine nor Quodvultdeus, who both mention Perpetua and Felicitas somewhat frequently, says that Felicitas had been a slave.

40. See TLL IV. 423 for *conserva* = *serva dei*. Cf. also Amat 1996: 193 (who favors the meaning “compagne d’esclavage”). The Greek manuscript here has σύνδουλοι (*syndouloi*) as the equivalent for *conserva*. See also Heffernan 2012: 19, 149; Bremmer 2012: 37.

41. See TLL IV. 423 (*conserva* = *serva eiusdem familiae*); Bremmer 2012: 37 and n.15.

42. See Praet 2003: 465–6. Burrus accepts Felicitas’ slave status, although she alludes to the Christian use of this term in a metaphorical, not a literal, way (“fellow slave in Christ”). She points to the language of torture that “scripts all martyrs as ‘slaves’” (2008: 68, n. 34). Bremmer rejects the Christian metaphorical use here since it would not add anything to our knowledge because all the fellow catechumens could be said to be “slaves of Christ” (2012: 37).

43. The dating of the *Acta* is unclear; cf. Chapter 1. Bremmer proposes a date of mid-third century (ca. 260 CE), but this seems too early (2012: 39–40). For a discussion of the *Acta*, see Halporn 1991. Most scholars now prefer a later date, late fourth century, before Augustine wrote his Sermon 282, which seems to refer to the *Acta* (see Bremmer 2012: 38–9 and nn. 22–25; Shaw 2004/1993: 312).

44. *Acta* I.5.3 (using Amat’s numbering). The Latin here for Felicitas’ response is *habeo quem nunc contemno*.

45. Shaw translates *congermanus* as “cousin” here (2004/1993: 293, n. 32; 313); Bremmer translates it as “brother” (2012: 41).

46. For the forms that such interrogations (*commentarii*) took, see Bisbee 1988.

47. *Passio* 15.2; see Bremmer 2012: 43 and n. 45.

48. In the *Passio*, Perpetua follows the others in (18.2), but in the *Acta*, Felicitas is the last to go in (*Acta* I.9.2). Thus Felicitas is highlighted in the *Acta*.

49. Cf. Tert. *De Bapt.* 16.1; Mark 10:38, Luke 12:50.

50. Bremmer argues for the reading *Cereres* in the plural (“the two Cereres”) in *Passio* 18.4 instead of *Cereri* or *Cereri* (“Ceres”), the readings that most editors accept (2012: 47, n. 63; cf. Farrell and Williams 2012: 30, n. 6; they read *Cererum*).

51. Cf. Kraemer 2008: 156–72; Habermehl 2004: 226, n. 69.

52. Perkins 2009a: 160.

53. Perkins 2009a: 167, 160.

54. Perkins 2009a: 168.

55. See here Bremmer 2012: 48; cf. Warner 2012: 353–4.

56. See also the proposal by Balch that visual scenes and figures from Pompeii might have influenced later Christian figures such as Perpetua and Felicitas. He claims: “A thesis of this article is that Helen, Medea, and Phaedra stepped off painted Roman walls into the bodies of Thecla, Perpetua, and Felicitas. Women as imagined and painted by artists, perhaps by female artists, took on bodies of flesh and blood” (Balch 2015: 381).

57. Cf. Kraemer 2008: 171–2: “Stories about women are unreliable, though not entirely unusable, sources for the actualities of women’s lives and experiences in the ancient world.”

58. See Ronsse, who calls the *Passio* a “subtle and intriguing rhetorical work” (2006: 283); McKechnie thinks that Perpetua had “the degree of competence in literary culture that was expected in an author” (1994: 280). Amat is more dubious about what Perpetua’s “libérale” education comprised (1996: 193). Ameling is equally wary: “Perpetua allows us a unique glimpse into the intellectual world of an educated woman—if you can call her educated” (2012: 79).

59. Cf. Ameling 2012: 88 (“what kind of education can be deduced from her writing?”).

60. Shaw 2004/1993: 302; Ronsse 2006: 312.

61. See Ameling for possible borrowings in the *Passio* from the Bible (although he says that the parallels are not convincing or evidence that Perpetua was directly quoting from the Old Testament or New Testament. She may simply have heard biblical stories during her instruction; 2012: 95–8).

62. See Barnes 1971: 187–210 (“A Pagan Education”); McKechnie 1994; Ameling 2012 (although he talks about a pagan education as possibly preventing the “Christian undermining” of Perpetua’s family [102]).

63. Barnes 1971: 187–210.

64. Ronsse 2006; Konstan 2012: 296, n. 9.

65. See Hemelrijk 1999: 28–30; Shaw 2004/1993: 293. Although some Roman girls married in their early to mid-teens, some upper-class girls married in their late teens, at 18 or 19 years of age. Shaw has reconsidered this question and suggests a later age for marriage of girls than was previously thought (Shaw 1987: 30–46). He says that, if Perpetua was married at age 18 or 19, this would be “a paradigm of matrimonial normality” (2004 [1993]: 293). See also Shaw’s conclusion in his article on “The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage,” that “the few indicators that there are concerning age at marriage . . . seem to point to a rather later age of marriage, probably in the late teens, as typical of *most* girls in Roman society” (1987: 43; his emphasis). Most of his evidence comes from a much later period than Perpetua’s lifetime.

66. Hemelrijk 1999: 29; 236, n. 55. For women’s literacy in the Greco-Roman world, see Harris 1989: especially 22–4, 252–3, 270–1.

67. See McKechnie 1994: 280–1.

68. For knowledge of Greek in Roman Africa, see Kotula 1969: 386–92. Although he says that Greek was in decline (as opposed to Latin) in Roman North African cities from the second century, it continued to be taught alongside Latin. Thus Greek was more a literary language and less likely to have been spoken.

69. The authors of the different sections of the *Passio* can be distinguished by their use of these *clausulae*; cf. Chapter 1.

70. Shewring 1928: 56–7. He claims, “her (Perpetua’s) rhythms are sufficiently different from the redactor’s to make it reasonably certain that her narrative was never revised by him” (57).

71. See McKechnie 1994: 281–2; Quint. *IO* 9.4.45–147, who says *cura ita magna ut sentiendi atque eloquendi prior sit* (the care that composition, including rhythm, demands is great but thought and expression demand more, *IO* 9.4.147). McKechnie suggests that normally such an education would be received from a *rhetor* but could have come at the end of training with a *grammaticus* if he was preparing his students for a rhetorical education. Ameling, on the other hand, who tends to be skeptical about

Perpetua's higher education, refers to Perpetua's "clumsy use of prose rhythm" (2012: 93). She knew, he believes, about prose rhythm "but that's about it" (91).

72. Ronsse 2006: 321.

73. Ronsse 2006: 312.

74. McKechnie 1994: 282. But see here Perkins 2015: She argues that Perpetua's inability to name and to unambiguously define the type of vessel she is pointing to shows the difficulty of "establishing a single meaning for a term (or individual) extracted from its context of relationships" (131). She says that Christianity allowed for even the uneducated to access education and philosophy: "The Christian insistence that their philosophy is open to all and that martyrs prove the ability of even the uneducated to philosophize contests the belief of both contemporary Platonism and the contemporary elite" (156).

75. McKechnie finds in Perpetua's arguments with the tribunes in *Passio* 16 and 18 evidence of *inventio* ("finding a persuasive argument to put forward," in *Passio* 16) and a possible echo in *Passio* 18, where Perpetua speaks of *libertas* and a compact between the person and the state, of Socrates' arguments in the *Crito* where there is an imagined dialogue between Socrates and the Laws of Athens (McKechnie 1994: 283).

76. See Tert. *De Idol.* 10.5–7; Eus. *HE* 6.18.2–4.

77. Robinson 1891: 26–7. See also Bremmer 2002 for a discussion of biblical and noncanonical references in the first vision (98–105).

78. Robinson 1891: 27–43.

79. Dronke 1984: 6–7. Cf. here Robinson, who says, "We can scarcely doubt that the Ladder in Perpetua's first Vision was suggested by the story of Jacob's Dream" (1891: 26); McKechnie, who refutes Dronke, saying that there are many biblical reminiscences in Perpetua's first vision. He thinks that, while each reference is not specific enough for us to tie it to the Bible, the sum of all six references makes it likely that Perpetua knew the Bible well (1994: 289–90).

80. Dronke 1984: 7–9, 285–6, n. 58 (on Apuleius). He says, however, that the parallels he cites between the *Passio* and Apuleius are not conclusive and were "at most faint memories of a book that Perpetua had firmly left behind" (286, n. 59). See the list of parallels given by Dronke in Ameling 2012: 90 (Ameling does not believe that Perpetua had read Apuleius). Bradley also takes issue with Dronke (2012: 123–5).

81. Shaw 2004/1993: 291.

82. Bradley 2012: 125.

83. Ameling 2012: 91 (on prose rhythm, citing here Fridh [1968], who says that Perpetua had "*une certaine education*," but had never studied with a *rhetor*); 90–1, on Perpetua's use of classical authors.

84. See, for these descriptors, Kraemer and Lander 2000: 1055; Shaw 2004/1993: 299–300; Dronke 1984: 6. Some critics have labeled this style artless or childish, but this is not a productive way of describing it (see here Shaw 2004/1993: 300, n. 50). As Shaw says, "this sort of rhetoric is 'characteristic,' not determined."

85. See for oral thought and expression in women's writing, Petroff 1986: 28–30 (Petroff, citing Ong, gives a list of characteristics of oral expression that also typify much of women's writing, e.g., additive not subordinate, redundant, close to the human life world, empathetic, participatory); Shaw 2004/1993: 300.

86. Ameling does not believe that, if Perpetua's style comes from a world of oral communication, it could be the result of her education (2012: 93–4).

87. Auerback says, "There was nothing like this (Perpetua's expression), nor could there be; there was no literary genre capable of presenting such a reality with so much dignity and elevation" (1965: 63). For Dhuoda, see Dronke 1984: 36–54.

Chapter 7

1. See on this, Bowersock 1995.
2. See Chapter 3. On the instability of these texts, see Halporn 1991: 230–1.
3. Moss 2013.
4. As Delehayé has said, "But fictions of this kind are not free from danger. So long as they are read in the spirit in which they were written, they achieve their object. But the time comes, and it may come quickly, when that original object is forgotten" (1962/1905: 51).
5. See Chapter 3.
6. Barnes (2016) dates the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* at 157 CE. But this has been disputed by several scholars including Moss (2010; 2012: 57–76; 2013: 94–104) and Ehrman (2013: 493–502), who date it later, to the first half of the third century.
7. Bowersock 1995: 6. He also mentions Stephen, who appears in the New Testament and was stoned to death: "This . . . is the one passage in the entire New Testament that might have effectively encouraged the sense of martyrdom as it was to develop" (1995: 15).
8. See Moss 2013: 23–53.
9. Boyarin 1999: 94.
10. Boyarin 1999: 95. See also Barton's statement about martyrs: "A martyr was a witness. But there were no martyrs without martyrs, no witnesses without witnesses" (1994b: 43).
11. Boyarin 1999: 95–6. See for a discussion of the eroticization of violent death and other aspects of martyrdom found also in earlier, pagan texts, Edwards 2007: 207–20, especially 213–14. Other lists of common elements in martyr tales are found in Droge and Tabor 1992: 75; Grig 2004: 8–11.
12. Cf. Tert. *Ad mart.* 4; *Apol.* 50.5–9.
13. See Droge and Tabor 1992: 75. They point to five common elements between and among New Testament accounts and later Jewish and Christian martyrologies: situations of opposition and persecution; a choice to die which is viewed as necessary, noble, and heroic; an eagerness to die; vicarious benefits from suffering and death; expectation of vindication and reward beyond death. See also Moss 2013: 23–82.
14. Bowersock 1995: 5; cf. also Straw 2002. While Bowersock considers Christian martyrdom a singular phenomenon not seen before the mid-second century CE, others see pagan and Jewish martyrs as offering similar or prior examples. See Weigel 2012; Moss 2013: 55–82.
15. Cf. Barton 1994b; Perkins 1995; Grig 2004: 8–26. Barton links Christian and Roman martyrs and gladiators more closely than many scholars have: Both are the humiliated and defeated who gain glory, and both inhabit the spheres of the honorable and the sacred (1994b: 51–2).

16. Barton 1994b: 50–1. See her comment on the enigmatic figure of the gladiator, who (like the Christian) “inspired both worship and disgust, emulation and loathing, sympathy and revulsion” (52).

17. Tert. *Ad mart.* 3.1; *Scorp.* 4.5.

18. Barton comments that *sacramentum* in its earlier uses more aptly applies to those fighting in the arena (gladiators) than soldiers in the field, “the arena where the most profound degradation was linked with the greatest exultation and glory” (1994b: 56).

19. See Straw 2002: 51, n. 7 for models of comparison between the Christian martyr and pagan soldier or gladiator. She says that the earlier (pre-Constantinian) *Acta* are regarded as more reliable historically while later acts are more didactic and aim to “teach ideals of Christian perfection.”

20. For chosen death, see Barton 1994b: 47 and n. 33; Straw 2002.

21. As Tertullian says, the Christians, in voluntarily going to their deaths, were following a noble pagan tradition before them. He cites such examples as Empedocles and Regulus (*Apol.* 50.5–6). But not everyone admired this aspect of Christian martyrdom, and the practice was condemned by later church figures such as Augustine and Clement. Cf. Bowersock 1995: 64–74.

22. *Mart. Polycarpi* 3.1.

23. Tert. *Scap.* 5.

24. Cf. Bowersock 1995: 1–5. He points out rightly that the acceptance of suicide, or voluntary martyrdom, arose out of Roman tradition but was anathema to both Greek and Jewish thought. Augustine firmly rejected suicide and brought an end to this act among the Romans (Bowersock 1995: 72–4).

25. Cyprian *Epist.* 81.1.4.

26. Perkins, in her book *The Suffering Self*, says that “Christian representation in the early Roman empire functioned to offer a particular self-representation to Christians—the Christian as sufferer The production of this subjectivity, the recognition and acceptance of a self-definition of sufferer, was essential for the growth of Christianity as an institution” (1995: 16, 214).

27. See on this Shaw 2011: 587–629.

28. Shaw discusses the later martyrs of the fourth century, when there was sectarian violence and death was recompensed by eternal life with power (2011: 626).

29. See on this Droge and Tabor 1992; Bowersock 1995: 1–21; Straw 2002; Shaw 2011: 587–629.

30. See Droge and Tabor 1992: 2 on the puzzled reaction of Lucian.

31. See on this Droge and Tabor 1992: 4; Bremmer 2004: 551–4 (Bremmer lists “a rational choice, supporting discourse and the promise of heaven” among the commonalities between Christian and Palestinian martyrs); Moss 2013, esp. 1–4.

32. See Shaw 2011: 627–8.

33. See Shaw 2004/1993: 297–8.

34. See Eus. *HE* 5.1; Bowersock 1995: 85–98. Bowersock proposes that the letter written by the Lyons martyrs to their brethren in Asia, which is preserved by Eusebius, has every appearance of being authentic. He points especially to the prescript of the letter, which contains interesting details about the home area in which the recipients of the letter lived (1995: 85). Bowersock dates the massacre of the martyrs to the time of Marcus Aurelius and not later, as has been suggested by others (see Shaw 2004/1993: 297, n. 43).

35. Eus. *HE* 5.1.17 (on Maturus, a γενναῖον ἀγωνιστήν [*gennaion agōnistēn*], a “noble contender”). In 5.1.19, Blandina is compared to a γενναῖος ἀθλητής (*gennaios athlētēs*, a “noble athlete”).

36. See Eus. *HE* 5.1.11; 25–6 (Biblis).

37. Eus. *HE* 5.1.17. For Blandina, see Shaw 2004/1993: 298–9.

38. Shaw 2004/1993: 299: The “special value of rarity attached to females, when coupled with the dangerous and yet alluring spectacle of witnessing the public violation of norms of sexuality and the mutilation of otherwise protected and honoured female bodies, gave a special edge, a sharper culmination to the display.”

39. On the name, see Barnes 1971: 63, n. 1 (reference to H. Dessau, Pauly-Wissowa II A. 819: “Scillium, so oder ähnlich”).

40. See Shaw (2004/1993: 298, n. 45); he refers the reader to P. Mesnage, *l’Afrique chrétienne: évêchés et ruines antiques* (Paris 1912), p. 219, for a discussion of the town’s location. See also Shaw 2011: 589, where he calls Scilli “a nothing of a place about 150 miles up the Bagrada Valley from Carthage.” The trial itself was held in Carthage.

41. See Robinson 1891: 106–11 for a discussion of the manuscripts, and 112–21 for the Greek and Latin versions; Barnes 1971: 60–2 for the transcript in English (this transcript seems not to be the complete one).

42. See Delehay 1962/1905: 61 for a discussion of the opening line of the transcript as we have it, which gives the information about the date and who was emperor. The first line is puzzling and has been read in different ways; cf. Barnes 1971: 60–1 for a different reading.

43. Tert. *Scap.* 3.4.

44. See Barnes 1971: 62–4.

45. See on these names, Barnes 1971: 63 and n. 9; Rives 1995: 223–4; Heffernan 2012: 282. Rives says that several of the six named martyrs had typical African names, and thus these people were “not immigrants, but natives of the province who had converted to this new religion” (223–4). The martyrs (Speratus in particular) had letters of Paul; they must have had a Latin translation since they probably did not know Greek. Rives suggests that the old Latin translation of the Bible came from Africa (224, n. 107).

46. Cf. Tert. *Scap.* 5.1; Barnes 1971: 146–7; Bowersock 1995: 1, 59.

47. See Moss 2013 on “how early Christians invented a story of martyrdom” (her subtitle).

48. For example, one of the martyrs in Lyons, Attalus, who was a Roman citizen, was sent to the beasts. See Barnes 1971: 147–8.

49. Perkins 1995: 12.

50. Cf. Perkins’ article on the formation of Christian identity under Roman imperial sovereignty, using Agamben’s theory of sovereignty and the “bare life” (Perkins 2013: 179–95).

51. See the answers of Felicitas, when a prison guard asks her how she can endure the pain of childbirth and the pain of her future martyrdom. Felicitas answers, “Now it is I alone who suffers; but there, in the arena, there will be another in me who will suffer on my behalf because I am going to suffer for him” (*Passio* 15.6).

52. Cf. Eus. *HE* 5.1.17–56.

53. Eus. *HE* 5.1.18.

54. Eus. *HE* 5.1.55.

55. Eus. *HE* 5.1.56.

56. Cf. Perkins 1995: 104–23; Shaw 1996: 269–312, esp. 309: “the body as the critical site of power discourses that flow through it and are inscribed upon it”; Grig 2002: 324.

57. Cf. McGowen on this: “The broken body of the condemned represented the restored order of the body politic” (as quoted by Perkins 1995: 117; this quote refers to another time period).

58. See *Passio* 20, where Perpetua has already been brought into the arena with Felicitas, exposed to the wild cow, and tossed around. She was brought temporarily through the Porta Sanavivaria where “As if awakened from sleep (for so much had she been in the Spirit and in ecstasy up until then), she began to look around her and to everyone’s amazement she said: ‘When will we be brought out to face that cow or whatever it is?’” (20.8). She was only convinced that she had already faced the cow when she saw the marks on her body.

59. See this criticism of Perkins’ 1995 book in Trout 1998: 563.

60. As Delehaye puts it, “The producing of revolting cruelties, description of extraordinary punishments, enormous exaggeration of the length and method of application of well-known punishments—such are the means commonly used by the hagiographers to make the boldness of the hero shine forth” (H. Delehaye, *Les passions des martyrs et les genres littéraires* [Brussels 1921], 284 [my translation]). For examples of such brutal and prolonged torments of martyrs, see Prudentius, *Peristephanon* (on this see M. Malamud, *A Poetics of Transformation: Prudentius and Classical Mythology* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989]; Grig 2002: 328–34).

61. The evidence for this military amphitheater is slim and comes mainly from the *Passio*. In *Passio* 7.9, Perpetua tells us that her group was transferred to the “military prison” (*carcerem castrensem*) in preparation for their fighting in the “military games” (*munere castrensi*) for Geta’s birthday. This reference has caused some scholars to think that there was another (military) amphitheater in Carthage near the camp of the urban cohort. Cf. Bomgardner 1989: 89, n. 21, citing Ruinart; Bomgardner 2000: 128–9 and n. 53 (p. 249). Bomgardner cites information from archaeologists who believe that they have discovered the remains of the military camp. Any definite location, however, remains open to question.

62. This fate befell many of the monuments from ancient Carthage. So Bomgardner says: “As medieval Tunis rose, ancient Carthage disappeared stone by stone” (2000: 128). Bomgardner maintains that, although this was the most important of the amphitheaters in North Africa in antiquity, it was the least known (2000: 128). For the restorations by the Pères Blancs, see Bomgardner 2000: 143–4. These monks also added a chapel for Perpetua and Felicitas.

63. See Bomgardner 1989; 2000: 121–96, especially 128–46.

64. Bomgardner 1989: 86.

65. See Bomgardner 1989: 97–8; 2000: 133–46, especially 145 (relying on evidence from Golvin and Lézine).

66. Bomgardner 2000: 134–5.

67. See Bomgardner 2000: 133 for this translation (not his own).

68. For instance, it is hard to believe that this amphitheater could have had five stories of arcades on top of each other; the largest number that we know of elsewhere is four stories in the Roman Colosseum. Thus, if al-Idrisi is correct, the Carthaginian amphitheater would have been larger than the Colosseum, an unlikely possibility.

69. See on this Bomgardner 2000: 142–3.

70. Futrell says, in regard to the Roman amphitheater: “The amphitheater was more than a striking Roman architectural type; it was a venue for the enactment of the ritual of power” (1997: 8).

71. See on this Potter 1993.

72. The reactions of victims in beast hunts range from fear to terror; this is evident from depictions in art including the Zliten mosaic and the relief from Nyssa. See Potter 1993: 68–9; Bergmann and Kondoleon 1999.

73. See Coleman 1990; Potter 1993: 66; Fagan 2011: 5–8.

74. The different segments of the games were, however, often observed, as we see from the anecdote found in the acts of Polycarp, where it is told that the audience demanded that Philip the Asiarch send out a lion against Polycarp. Philip refused on the grounds that the time (or days) for the beast shows was over. Cf. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 12 (Musurillo); Coleman 1990: 57.

75. Coleman 1990: 62–3.

76. For a transhistorical and transcultural analysis of “the lure of the arena,” based heavily in human social psychology, see Fagan 2011.

77. See Coleman 1990: especially 54, 57–8; Bergmann and Kondoleon 1999.

78. See here Edwards 2007: 207–20; Fagan 2011: 1–12, 287–324. The fact that, even among Christians, motives for attending the games differed reflects the fact that in general Christians were not “a unified or uniform phenomenon” (Perkins 2015: 130, quoting Karen King). There were many diverse views espoused by those who identified as Christians, none of which should be considered the normal or standard view.

79. Cf. Tert. *Spect.* 30. As Edwards points out, the sufferings of the damned souls that Christians will be able to view participate in just the kind of violence and torment that the Christian writers found so repugnant in the secular games on offer (2007: 208). For Augustine’s delivery of true spectacles in his sermons to his congregants, see Grig 2004: 42–7.

80. Aug. *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 39.9 (as cited by Edwards 2007: 214: *haec munera, haec spectacula edit deus*).

81. Of course ordinary Christians might well have enjoyed going to the less violent entertainments in the circus and the theater, just as their fellow countrymen did. Cf. Toner 2014: 117–18.

82. See also Tert. *Spect.* 15.5 for comment on how a man can enjoy a spectacle in a modest and fitting manner and yet have his soul and spirit aroused.

83. Aug. *Conf.* 6.8.13. See Fagan 2011: Appendix (287–324) for this passage and other passages from ancient authors that are testaments to the behavior of those who attended the games and offer comments on their behavior. Also cf. Fagan 2011: Introduction, which is titled “Alypius in the Stands” (1–12). Fagan comments that, “the strikingly immediate nature of this account raises justifiable suspicions that Augustine is here describing his own experiences rather than someone else’s” (1). Augustine tells us elsewhere that he himself once sat in the arena and became crazed (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 147.18; *De Civ. D.* 2.4).

84. See here Edwards 2007: 214–16.

85. Hopkins 1999: 112–13.

86. See Parker 1999: 163, writing about the Roman theater.

87. Gunderson 1996: 149.

88. Gunderson says that, in Juvenal, the optics of the arena “reveal the sand as a site of the play between the Roman and the non-Roman, where the excluded margin is used

to constitute the legitimate order even as the abjected object bears the trace of the order that refuses it" (1996: 149). If the Christians are the non-Roman here, the abjected object, I suspect that the order that refused them bore a trace of them as time went on.

89. On the psychology of the arena (for which there is no one or easy explanation), see Fagan 2011.

90. See Toner 2014: 102.

Chapter 8

1. I use the term "church fathers" with some hesitation because it has come to describe a widely varied collection of writers connected to the early Christian church whose individual strategies of gaining authority were later institutionalized by their successors into a broader narrative of power. Nonetheless, the term is recognized as a standardized term with meaning that will be understood by most readers and thus it, like "pagan," is convenient to use despite its problems.

2. See Carruthers 1998; Cotter-Lynch 2012; Cotter-Lynch and Herzog 2012; Cotter-Lynch 2016; Kitzler 2015.

3. See Cotter-Lynch and Herzog 2012: 4, citing the essay in their volume by Ana Maria Machado (135–64). See also Barbetti: "What matters is not whether what is reported is *real*, but, as Carruthers suggests, how the cast of these images resonates with a social narrative" (2012: 96).

4. Shaw (2004/1993: 309–10) has a slightly different take on the editor's position here. He argues that the editor indicates a certain "untouchability" of her text when the editor says that, although he is unworthy to add to the story of such a glorious deed, he will follow her dying command and add examples of her steadfastness (*constantia*) and lofty soul (*animi sublimitate*, *Passio* 16.1). The editor cannot improve on Perpetua's account so he does the next best thing and surrounds it with his own "reader's guide."

5. Shaw 2004/1993: 311.

6. See Bremmer 2012: 39–40; Kitzler 2015: 65–72.

7. See on all these authors Cotter-Lynch 2016.

8. Shaw 2004/1993: 312. Shaw (309ff.) has a good discussion of the early history of these changes, in the *Acta* and the church fathers, and of the "male rethinking of her experience" (309), an experience and a text that were "buried under an avalanche of male interpretations, rereadings and distortions" (322).

9. See on this Sigismund-Nielsen 2102: 117, and the conclusion to this chapter.

10. Clark 1998: 31.

11. See Clark 2008 on these strategies used by the church fathers. The phrase "strategies of containment" is taken from Jameson (1981: 52–4). It is through such a strategy that authors are "able to project the illusion that their readings are somehow complete and self-sufficient" (Jameson 1981: 10).

12. See on similar stereotyping in the early empire, Gold 1998, esp. 375–6.

13. Cf. Gold 1993: 84.

14. For two good sources on the afterlife of the *Passio Perpetuae*, see Kitzler 2015 (who takes her influence up through Augustine and the *Acta*) and Cotter-Lynch 2016, who takes her afterlife up through the Middle Ages. See Kitzler (123–4) for a useful chronological outline of the reception of the *Passio* until the end of the fifth century.

15. See Kitzler 2015: 72–80.

16. See Kitzler, who says “the ‘Nachleben’ of the *Passio Perpetuae* starts surprisingly early: with the editor himself, who was a contemporary of the events narrated in Perpetua’s and Saturus’ records and could be seen as the very first interpreter of the *Passio*” (2015: 56).

17. See Bremmer 2012: 39–40; he tentatively suggests a date of 260 CE for the *Acta*, right after the persecutions of Valerian, which stimulated an interest in the *Passio Perpetuae*.

18. See here Cotter-Lynch 2016: 5–8, 155–6, and *passim*.

19. Kitzler puts Augustine first, with the *Acta* a culmination of what Augustine and his followers had already done to normalize and cleanse the Perpetua story (2015: 80–122); he does, however, allude to the fact that the *Acta* contain “certain formulations which already appear in Augustine’s sermons” and therefore speculates that some versions of the *Acta* (*Acta A*) might have been written by a disciple of Augustine around the mid-fifth century. Cotter-Lynch discusses the dating in her chapter 2 (43–61, esp. 43–6); she suggests that *Acta A* is earlier (fourth century) while *Acta B* postdates Augustine. Bremmer (2012: 39–40) tentatively puts the *Acta* much earlier.

20. For a longer analysis of the *Acta*, see Chapter 1 of this book.

21. See discussion in Chapter 1; Cotter-Lynch 2016: 56–7.

22. See on this Kitzler 2015: 80–98, esp. 93–8; Cotter-Lynch 2016: 63–86.

23. For a history of Byzantine and early Islamic North Africa (ca. 500–800 CE), see now Susan T. Stevens and Jonathan P. Conant, eds., *North Africa Under Byzantium and Early Islam* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2016), especially the essay by Susan T. Stevens on “Carthage in Transition: From Late Byzantine City to Medieval Villages” (89–103).

24. On the survival of Christianity in North Africa and its spread to other parts of the Mediterranean, see Conant 2010.

25. For this text and discussion of others in medieval England, see Cotter-Lynch 2016: 113–35. For the reception of the Perpetua story, especially in medieval England, see also the unpublished dissertation of Erin Ronsse, *Rhetoric of Martyrs. Transmission and Reception History of the Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* (University of Victoria, 2007). Ronsse points out that many of the extant manuscripts relating to the *Passio* are from medieval England.

26. See Heffernan 2012: 3–59 for a discussion of (and an attempt to identify where possible) the *personae* in the *Passio*.

27. Pomponius is often compared to the pagan dignitary who brings the participants to the contest, but, as Bremmer points out, his dress, especially the absence of a belt, marks him as a Christian, not a pagan (2002: 114–15).

28. The Egyptian may also be used to signify the paradigm of a strong athlete. Bremmer (2002, 116) cites L. Robert here for Robert’s influential interpretation of the athletic contest in the fourth vision. Bremmer points out that the Egyptians were the “athletes par excellence of the Roman Empire,” and therefore it is not surprising that an Egyptian would be Perpetua’s opponent here. But also the Devil was often represented as black, and this may have affected the choice of the Egyptian in Perpetua’s contest.

29. Palladius, *Lausiac History*, Prol. 5, trans. W. K. Lowther Clarke (London 1918), 37. Such women received accolades for their manly piety but were also condemned and feared for their gender ambiguity and their casting off of traditional roles. See Castelli 1991: 44–5.

30. Palladius, *Dialogus de vita S. Ioannis Chrysostomi* in Migne, PG 47:56, cited by Castelli 1991: 45 and n. 22.

31. Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae* 1; cf. Clark 1983: 236.
32. Porphyry, *Ad Marcellam*, cited by Castelli 2008: 83–4 and n. 61.
33. See on this Castelli 2008: passim, esp. 83–6. She (citing Cora Lutz) notes that Musonius Rufus defends using the word ἀνδρεία (*andreia*, “manliness”) for women, but that Plutarch, in his *On the Bravery of Women*, uses the term ἀρετή (*aretê*, “excellence”) which does not have the same male denotation (Castelli 2008: 86). See also Clark 1986: 45, who says that the phrase “manly courage” in Greek is almost a tautology “since the word for courage, *andreia*, indicates its masculine association.”
34. Castelli 1991: 45–6.
35. Gal. 3:28, quoted by Jerome, *Ep.* 71.2.2; 75.2.2.
36. See Castelli 2008: 84; Burrus 2008: 70–1.
37. See Castelli 2008: 76–7, citing Brock; Clark 1986: 45, who says that “the church fathers frequently asserted that asceticism was a new form of martyrdom, one in which we could be martyred daily.” Cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 130 to Demetrias, where Jerome compares the courage of the virginal young maiden, who renounced marriage, to the courage shown by martyrs like Agnes (130.5).
38. Cobb 2008: 89–90.
39. The cult of Perpetua and Felicitas was largely restricted to Carthage in this period; cf. Kitzler 2007: 6, n. 15 (citing Divjak and Wischmeyer). It is not clear what books could be included as part of liturgy. See Boughton 1991: 382; she points out that after the Council of Hippo set forth the biblical canon in 393, “only selections from canonical books could be read in the liturgical assembly. On the feast day of a saint, however, an exception could be made. A selection from the appropriate hagiography, specifically the story of a saint’s persecution, could be read to the congregation.” And thus it was with the story of Perpetua.
40. Cobb 2008: 109 calls the process “creative exegesis.”
41. Sermons 280–2 of Augustine are widely regarded as genuine (Migne, *PL* 38, col. 1280–6; van Beek 1936: 149*–156*). Another manuscript, containing more parts of Sermon 282 (282 auct.) was discovered in 2007 in the Erfurt University Library and is regarded as genuine; see Schiller et al. 2008: 251–60 for a discussion and 260–4 for the *editio princeps* of the text. Two other sermons, 394 and 394A, are not regarded as genuine but rather were composed by someone writing in the style of Augustine, perhaps Quodvultdeus, bishop of Carthage in the early fifth century and a younger contemporary of Augustine. These are classified as *sermones dubii*. See Dolbeau 1995 and 2005: 337–54 for a complete discussion of 394A; he rejects them as genuine mainly on stylistic grounds. See also on Sermons 280–82, Elm von der Osten 2008: 275–98; Shaw 2004/1993: 314–19; Kitzler 2015: 86–93. Perpetua is mentioned in, though not central to, another sermon (labeled 159A by Farrell 2012: 309, n. 28); in Dolbeau 1996b, this is Sermon 3, *De Honorandis vel Contemnendis Parentibus*.
42. See Kitzler 2015: 82–5.
43. The augmented version of Sermon 282 discovered in Erfurt is important because it has phrases in it used also in the *Acta*, and therefore Augustine must have known the *Acta* (which would then be dated earlier than was previously thought).
44. Another woman, Guddene, was martyred at almost the same time as Perpetua and Felicitas (on June 27, 203) in Carthage. We have a sermon written by Augustine for Guddene’s feast day (Sermon 294), but in this sermon, which is on the topic of the baptism of infants, Augustine makes no mention of Guddene. For the text of Guddene’s martyrdom, see Quentin 1908: 174. See on her martyrdom Shaw 2004/1993: 325 (see also his comment in 2004/1993: 315 and n. 79 on the fact that Augustine often used

the occasion of a saint's birthday to deliver a sermon on another subject entirely, as in the case of Crispina). Shaw makes the case that the difference between Perpetua and Guddene was one of class: Perpetua provoked multiple responses from Augustine because she was of a higher social status and thus had to be reckoned with (of course Felicitas was probably a slave, but one might argue that she was privileged by Augustine because of her relationship with Perpetua). Shaw says, "In this social setting . . . the fact of gender was strongly, if not decisively, modulated by that of class" (325). See also Cobb 2008: 178–9, n. 77; she comments on the fact that, while Augustine often acknowledges saints' days, he does not usually incorporate the saint into his homily. Perpetua also attracted more attention and refutation because we have a document purported to be written in her own words.

45. For the Latin text of Sermons 280–2, see van Beek 1936: 149*–154*.

46. Shaw says, "he is interested in making her experiences concordant not with traditional practices, but also with present and future thinking" (2004/1993: 319).

47. See Heffernan 2012: 365, who says that Augustine was anxious to divert attention away from her "feminine heroism"; Shaw 2004/1993: 316–19; Cobb 2008: 107–11.

48. See on representations of Eve in antiquity Flood 2011, especially 7–48.

49. See Burrus 2008: 67.

50. See Shaw 2004/1993; Gold 2013. There is, however, disagreement about whether Perpetua is presented as a masculine or feminine figure; cf. Perkins 2009, who stresses that, apart from Perpetua's fourth vision, it is a mother's body and not a man's that is central in the *Passio* (165; cf. also 166–7). See also Cobb 2008: 176, n. 53. On gender in the *Passio*, see Williams 2012.

51. 1931: 56.

52. 1994: 81.

53. *Mulier* is often used in opposition to *virgo* (and often in parallel to *femina*) to designate a woman who is married or has had sexual experience; see TLL VIII 1571, 3–1575, 20, esp. 1574, 5–34. But cf. Aug. Sermon. 282.3, where Augustine discusses the men in the group along with Perpetua and Felicitas. It was not the case that the day was named after the women, he says, because "women (*feminae*) were preferred before men (*viris*) for the worthiness of their conduct, but because the weakness of women (*muliebris infirmitas*) more marvelously did vanquish the ancient Enemy and also the strength of men (*virilis virtus*) contended to win a perpetual felicity" (see Shewring 1931b: 56).

54. Quodvultdeus, bishop of Carthage in the early fifth century, is much more explicit. He says that both Perpetua and Felicitas are mothers, one pregnant and in labor, and one nursing (*De temp. barb.* 5.6).

55. On the link between virginity/chastity and fecundity, see Weitbrecht 2012: 150–66, esp. 159; see also Cameron 1989 on virginity used as a metaphor and on the relationship of virginity to misogyny; Tilley 1994: 851: "what even God could not do, according to the medievalists, the church did: Perpetua and Felicitas were liturgically rendered virgins."

56. Ronsse has suggested that the names Perpetua and Felicitas, which seem an "uncanny fit," were perhaps given to the two women after they were admitted to the catechumenate or at their baptisms (as happened often in the Bible and still happens today). Other possibilities are that these two women "simply lived up to their original names" or "in hindsight, were figuratively designated by the literary compiler" (Ronsse 2006: 302).

57. See on this Heffernan 1995: 316 and n. 6. Heffernan refers to Aug. Sermon. 282.2, and says that Augustine "finds the *Passio* of interest for its use of rhetoric, citing the

paronomasia in the names of Perpetua and Felicitas with the virtues his Christian congregation should cultivate.”

58. This pun also appears in one of the *Acta* (I 5,9), but it is put into the mouth of Perpetua. There she says, in answer to the judge’s questioning, “*Christiana sum et nominis mei sequor auctoritatem, ut sim perpetua*” (“I am a Christian, and I am faithful to the meaning of my name so that I might be ‘perpetual’”). Here too a (presumably) male editor has punned on Perpetua’s name, but this time the pun is put into the mouth of the martyr herself.

59. See on this passage van Beek 1936: 154*; Steinhauser 1997: 244–9, esp. 247; Farrell 2012: 308–11. Kitzler comments: “To use a work such as the *Passio Perpetuae* as a kind of shield was a very deft tactical move given the reverential status the text had within the early Church. Augustine went to considerable lengths in his *De Natura et Origine Animae* to ward off the danger, including a questioning of Perpetua’s authorship” (2007: 15, n. 53).

60. See Rebillard 2012: 61–91, esp. 74–9. Rebillard addresses here the multiple identities of Christians and the bishop’s duty to bring his congregation together.

61. See Trout 1994 for a good discussion of Augustine’s treatment of Lucretia in the *City of God*. Trout says that by retextualizing Lucretia, “Augustine intended to confront contemporaries with the culturally subversive implications of a Christian understanding which discounted the values that symbol had so long denoted” (55).

62. Trout 1994: 57.

63. Trout 1994: 57 and n.19. Cf. also Tert. *Ad mart.* 4.4, who similarly says that Lucretia “stabbed herself in the presence of her kinsfolk to gain glory for her chastity.” See also Loraux 1987.

64. Tertullian had already offered Lucretia among others as an example of people who in the pagan past had showed strong resistance by committing suicide (*Ad mart.* 4.3–6). His exempla are mainly men, but Lucretia stands at the head of the list. See Weigel 2012: 189, who suggests that Perpetua’s martyrdom can thus be seen not only as an *imitatio Christi* but also as an *imitatio Lucretiae*.

65. See Trout 1994: 62–5 for these themes in Augustine’s treatment of Lucretia in *City of God* (*De Civ. Dei*) 1.19. On the figure of Lucretia as a pre-Perpetuan example of male fortitude in a female body, see Williams 2012: 71–2; Weigel 2012: 189–93. The Roman author Valerius Maximus says about Lucretia, a paragon of chastity, that “her manly spirit (*virilis animus*) was allotted a woman’s body (*muliebre corpus*) by a malicious error of fate” (6.1.1).

66. For what little we know of Quodvultdeus, see Finn 2004: 1–3; Shaw 2004/1993: 319–22; Kitzler 2015: 95–6.

67. *De temp. barb.* (Braun) I.5.2; cf. Aug. Sermon. 281.

68. *De temp. barb.* (Braun) I.5.6; cf. Aug. Sermon. 280.

69. *De temp. barb.* I.5.6; cf. Aug. Sermon. 281.

70. *De temp. barb.* (Braun) I.5.5–6.

71. Van Beek includes this in his *Testimonia* with works of Quodvultdeus, but with a question mark (1936: 158*–160*). An edition of this work by Morin was published in 1917 along with other unpublished sermons of Augustine and his school; Morin ascribes it doubtfully to Quodvultdeus (Germanus Morin, O.S.B., *Sancti Aureli Augustini Tractatus sive Sermones Inediti* [Monaco: Koeseliana, 1917]). See Dolbeau 1995: 89, 95–7, for a discussion; he points out that the themes in this work closely match those found in Augustine’s sermons on Perpetua and Felicitas and in Quodvultdeus’ *De tempore barbarico* (Dolbeau 1995: 95). Some have thought that this work could be by Augustine,

but that attribution is extremely unlikely, not least because section 6 of the *Tractatus de Natale* (in Morin's edition) quotes exactly the first section of Aug. Sermon 282 (so this would be self-plagiarism or self-reference on a large scale). It is likely, in any case, that the *Tractatus* dates from the first half of the fifth century, whoever the author was (Dolbeau 1995: 97).

72. See Shaw 2004/1993: 320–1. There is also very similar language in *De temp. barb.* (attributed to Quodvultdeus) 5.6: “Una earum erat praegnans, alia lactans. Felicitas parturiebat, Perpetua lactabat” (“one of them was pregnant, the other lactating. Felicitas was with child, Perpetua was lactating”). Kitzler points out that Quodvultdeus may be the first commentator on Perpetua to have given us a psychological reading of her visions (especially vision one); see Kitzler 2015: 95–6 and n. 449 (citing Kleinberg there).

73. The Latin here says *viginti duos agebat annos*, which I take to mean 22 years old. Shaw counts inclusively and says “about 21 years” (2004/1993: 321).

74. Shaw 2004/1993: 321. Tilley (1994: 851) says that both Augustine and Quodvultdeus claimed that Perpetua and Felicitas, like all women martyrs, became male not in body but in spirit and that “their female bodies were denied any importance.” While this may be true, the later male commentators had a peculiar, almost voyeuristic fascination with the female martyrs’ bodies.

75. He is sometimes called Notker “Balbulus” (Godman 1985: 65), although these may be two different people.

76. See for the translation Dronke 1968: 41–2 (slightly revised here).

77. Cotter-Lynch 2012: 50. It should be noted that Notker was a monk from St. Gall, and it was in the library at St. Gall that our earliest manuscript of the *Passio* was discovered (from the ninth century). Thus, even if the *Passio* was not on the standard monastic reading list, Notker would have been familiar with it. See also Godman 1985: 66: “The Latin recension of this work is rare in the early Middle Ages, and no other Carolingian author displays such distinctive debts to it.” Messenger (1947) discusses the library at St. Gall and Notker’s role as librarian (61–2); she says that only Notker’s knowledge of Augustine’s Sermon 280 on Perpetua can be proven.

78. Cotter-Lynch 2012: 49 points to the ecclesiastical reforms instituted by Louis the Pious in the ninth century. She says that Notker used his work “to assert a particularly ninth-century system of gender,” writing Perpetua, as well as the women in his audience, into his system. See also Cotter-Lynch 2016: 92–106.

79. Cotter-Lynch 2012: 46–7.

80. Godman 1985: 67. See Geary on this process of rewriting the past: “A society that explicitly found its identity, its norms, and its values in the inheritance from the past, that venerated tradition and drew its religious and political ideologies from precedent, was nevertheless actively engaged in producing that tradition through a complex process of transmission, suppression, and re-creation” (1984: 8).

81. For Jacob de Voragine, see Cotter-Lynch 2016: 137–53, esp. 149–50 for the number of translations, manuscripts, and printings of it.

82. Cotter-Lynch calls Perpetua here “a footnote to a footnote for St. Saturninus” (2016: 137).

83. Shaw 2004/1993: 322.

84. See Sigismund-Nielsen 2012: 103 on this point.

85. Farrell 2012: 311.

86. Shaw 2004/1993: 322.

87. See Amat 1996: 250.

88. Sigismund-Nielsen 2012: 117.

89. Cooper 1998. These scholars are often, but not always, female. Brent Shaw, for example, has written an interesting analysis of the *Passio* employing what I would call feminist techniques (Shaw 2004/1993).

90. Cooper 1998: 157; cf. *Passio* 10.15.

91. Cameron 1989: 184, 200. See also Cameron's note on the "valiant efforts to rehabilitate early Christian writing as women's writing" (184, n.1).

92. Burrus 2008.

93. Burrus 2008: 59.

94. Burrus 2008: 70–1.

95. See Warner: "meanings of all kinds flow through the figures of women, and they often do not include who she herself is" (1985: 331).

96. Tilley 1994: 851–2.

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